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Arousing Possibilities: The Cultural Work of Lesbian Pornography

by

Maureen Engel ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

Edmonton, Alberta
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Abstract

"Arousing Possibilities: the Cultural Work of Lesbian Pornography" examines print-based North-American lesbian pornography of the 1980s and early 1990s. These texts both represent and generate communities and erotic possibilities which stand in opposition to regulatory frameworks of heterosexuality, privatization and individuality. The Introduction sets the context for both the porn itself and my reading strategy. I take a cultural studies approach by placing the material onto the complex cultural and material fields of its production, reception, and circulation, and by drawing my reading strategy from a variety of theoretical frameworks. Drawing primarily on Hall's analysis the circuit of communication, Foucault's analysis of sexuality and power, and Hocquenghem's theorization of anoedipal or "group" desire, I articulate the structural forces of oppression which these texts stand against, as well as the oppositional erotic possibilities which they produce. Chapter One argues that On Our Backs and Bad Attitude, particularly the dialogue which these magazines enter into with the lesbian community, restructure the contours of the existing lesbian community, and bring new communities and desires into being. Speaking again to explicit dialogue, Chapter Two looks at the interactive work of Canadian artists Kiss & Tell, analysing the relationship between "drawing the line" around specific communities and practices in the context of the less malleable boundaries of the law and the nation state. Chapter Three speaks to community building in the work of writer, activist and archivist Joan Nestle. She demonstrates how sexuality and

eroticism are vital components of movements against oppression by making historical connections among marginalised communities. Chapter Five is centrally concerned with the political and erotic possibilities which lesbian pornography produces. I read the work of Pat (now Patrick) Califia and argue that her work produces and circulates a "group" desire in Hocquenghem's sense. The conclusion locates the end of the era, analysing how the commodification of lesbians/lesbianism through "Lesbian Chic" changes the field on which lesbian pornography operates, rendering its cultural interventions less radical and more susceptible to interpellation. I leave open the possibility that these interventions will find new forms and venues which are now in the process of formation.

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Introduction

It is with a reasonable dose of irony that I note that my coming out (importantly, when I was a teenager) fell somewhere between the "coming out" of the Samois anthology Coming to Power in 1981 and the first issue of On Our Backs in 1984. This circumstance points to two interesting influences on my perception of what it means to be a lesbian which I only began to examine and theorize to my satisfaction some 15 years later. The first is that I came out in the midst of the Sex Wars; the second is that I was a lesbian before I was a feminist. These two factors combined to make me far more passionate about sex than I was about politics. I didn't question whether it was "right" for me to tie up my girlfriends any more than I questioned whether it was right for me to kiss them – after all, once I had gotten over the social regulation which demanded that I not express my desires for women, the slippery slope of pleasure seemed a small step and a fine ride. It was also, admittedly, easy to dismiss feminist arguments against the kind of sex I had on the basis that feminists were just another set of authority figures trying to tell me what to do. Such is the blissful arrogance of adolescence.

But then, I did become a feminist (and an academic) and I began to be as passionate about politics and ideas as I was about sex. Nonetheless, these two worlds continued to exist for me across some insurmountable chasm: nothing about my sexual world could make sense of my intellectual or political world, and the sense that my political and intellectual world made of my sexual one was woefully inadequate at best, and utterly crippling at worst. I read Susie Bright and Pat Califia, became one of the founding "editrixies" of a porn 'zine, started my local chapter of "Censorstop" and took up the cause against Canada Customs. Lesbian sadomasochism and pornography came together for me to form something that I found remarkably compelling, stimulating and enabling. Yet my world of ideas and politics had neither the language nor the inclination to understand my sexual world, though it was well armed to attack it. The only way for those conflicts to coexist was for me to live with the understanding that the nameless faceless "they" of feminist scholarship and politics had simply gotten it wrong. But that placid acceptance turned first to restlessness, then to outright anger. To counter that vilification, I found only the words of liberalism: "rights," "diversity," and "privacy." But this too proved unsatisfying; I knew that there was more to both pornography and S/M than just a desire for sexual plurality and acceptance. This project is an attempt to articulate that politics.

Susie Bright, in her inaugural "Toys for Us" column, says that her Susie Sexpert persona was born of a rant. In many ways, this project is also born of a rant. As I began to read what had been written about pornography, lesbian and heterosexual alike, I was struck by the sheer absence of the materials themselves; reading pornography seemed only to involve reading an *idea* of pornography -- creating a representation of representations that provided a modicum of safety, and perhaps even a veneer of respectability. But the texts themselves *were* there, whether the arguments and analyses wanted to acknowledge them or not. Trained as a literary critic and an active producer of porn myself, I could no longer abide the erasure of these texts; like the inimitable Suzie Sexpert, I embarked on my own rant and this project was born. No matter how theoretically or generically deviant this project may be, the one foundational conviction that never wavers is that it matters to actually read these texts, for all of their contradictions, shortcomings, excesses and possibilities.

I offer these prefatory personal remarks as a way of locating myself within this project, foregrounding the fact that I am as much a part of this history as I am an analyst of it. I see it as a way of laying my sexual, political, and intellectual cards on the table, setting out why I was compelled to undertake this project and what my investments in it are. Moving outward from the personal, however, this introduction will outline a series of problems and contexts that form the foundation of the textual analyses that follow. I will begin by laying out the ways that this project is problem driven, briefly enumerating the questions that it asks and the answers and solutions that it posits in order to set the terms for the foundational and methodological overview that follows. I will then set out the basic terms and contexts for the project, the discursive field, by attending to both terminology and the debates that ground this analysis. Finally, I will lay out the theoretical framework that I employ in order to read these texts as the complex cultural articulations[1] that they are.

Starting Points: Problems, Questions and Reading Strategies

Pornography names an argument, not a thing.

Walter Kendrick, The Secret Museum (31)

At first glance, Kendrick's deceptively simple sentence deftly summarizes the long cultural, political, aesthetic and intellectual history of pornography. From blasphemous engravings to revolutionary pamphlets, from obscene books to recuperated "Art," from political problem to moral problem to feminist problem, the history of pornography is a vexed and complex one. As Kendrick suggests in this statement, the term "pornography" itself is not denotative but connotative; pornography does not refer to a discrete set of identifiable cultural productions, but rather to the interpretive practices, politics, and judgements that render those cultural productions intelligible. While Kendrick's shift in emphasis from the object itself to the discourse that enables it is a pivotal step toward both understanding and analysis, I would also posit that pornography in fact invokes not just *an* argument, but multiple intertwined arguments. Lesbian pornography is no exception. It is embroiled in debates over representation, censorship, state regulation, sexual identity and practices, feminist politics, marginalization and oppression, and political economy.

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[1] I mean "articulations" in the double sense that Stuart Hall uses the term, that is as simultaneously an expression and a joining together.

So, just as lesbian pornography invokes and participates in a wide range of arguments, a critical examination of lesbian pornography must necessarily engage with a complex web of discourses and social practices. It must attend to the construction and regulation of sexuality; it must see and understand the "lesbian" of lesbian pornography, and read lesbian porn as distinct from mainstream pornography; it must understand the relationship of lesbians, pornography, and lesbian pornography to feminism; it must take as its object pornography in its own right, both in its similarities to and differences from other cultural forms; it must recognize the economic realities of the producers, consumers, and of the culture as a whole; and it must recognize that, while these social and cultural fields shape the very possibility of lesbian pornography's production, the texts themselves serve as cultural and political agents, producing new discursive contexts, new knowledges, and new communities. This is what the material itself demands. Thus, my project will borrow from a series of theoretical perspectives and methodologies in order to express firstly how lesbian pornography is produced by this web, and secondly, how it itself produces a community.

I begin with this catalogue of what the texts themselves demand out of political necessity. Too often the object in discussions about pornography is taken for granted.

The assumption is perhaps best summed up in US Justice Potter Stewart's by now infamous comment, "I can't tell you what it is, but I know it when I see it" (cited in Hard Core 5).[2] The sheer force of this tautology is evidenced in its haunting of almost any thinking or writing about pornography in the 20th century. While Stewart nicely sums up our culture's common-sensical understanding of pornography, there are other connotations to this term that make my reading strategy necessary. Perhaps most distressing are analyses that make pornography stand in for any number of distinct forms of sexual oppression and assault. Andrea Dworkin, for example, in Pornography: Men Possessing Women defines pornography as "the orchestrated destruction of women's bodies and souls," thus placing any and every form of oppression and brutality under the sign "pornography." In fact, the chapter entitled "Pornography" is a mere four pages long. These two examples serve to demarcate the extreme ends of a spectrum of misidentification and assumption, from complete absence to ubiquitous presence. Stewart relegates pornography to utter abstraction ("I can't tell you what it is"), while Dworkin invests it so heavily that it becomes almost everything. In each of these instances, pornography as a term loses all meaning.

What I intend to do here is to turn the approach around, to read 1980s lesbian pornography as the starting point of an argument, to ask the question "what does lesbian pornography have to say about lesbian sexuality, culture, and history?" I want to ask not what do we as a culture have to say about these texts, but rather, what do these texts *say to us?* What communities do they represent? More importantly, what communities do they generate?

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[2] This particular (mis)understanding of the pornographic did not, of course, enter the world with Stewart's utterance. He simply gave words to a pervasive perspective that has scarcely changed since he did so.

In answering these questions, I will certainly frame these texts in terms of their relationship to the "argument," as Kendrick puts it. However, I refuse to let the argument speak for the texts. I will not, for instance, use Kiss & Tell to exemplify how sexually explicit representations "speak back" to state censorship, nor will I treat Pat Califia's work primarily as a response to Radical Feminism. That approach would bend the material in the service of the argument, an approach which I am unwilling to take. These texts are not simply rejoinders (though they function at least partly that way); they are far more complex than that. I believe in the power of words and the power of representation and I believe that these words and representations *act* in the world. While it is vital to examine the ways in which they are framed by and engage with the arguments, my project will not neglect the fact that these texts actively produce other possibilities, other ways of being and seeing.

The Discursive Field

What is (a) Lesbian?

The word "lesbian" has two grammatical functions: it is both a noun and an adjective. As a noun, the Oxford English Dictionary simply defines "lesbian" as "a female homosexual." (Homosexual: A person who has a sexual propensity for his or her own sex; *esp.* one whose sexual desires are directed wholly or largely towards people of the same sex.) Following from this definition, it defines the adjectival function of *lesbian* as "Of a woman homosexual, characterized by a sexual interest in other women. Also, of or pertaining to homosexual relations between women." These basic definitions speak to a commonsensical understanding of what the term "lesbian" means.

Yet the simple definition, which defines "lesbian" by virtue of "sexual propensity" and understands that propensity to be directed toward an object, cannot account for the historical and cultural connotations that cling to the term. As a number of scholars have rightly pointed out, the concept of the "homosexual" and the corollary term "lesbian" are distinct phenomena that arise in the late nineteenth century.[3] As John

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[3] I do not intend here to conflate the terms "homosexual" and "lesbian." There are significant and important historical, political, and theoretical differences between the two terms, differences that I will attend to as they arise. There are, however, significant (if broader) similarities, and in the specific context that I am exploring here, the similarities

D'Emilio notes,

> Before then [the nineteenth century], in Western Europe and in the portions of North America populated by European settlers, men and women engaged in what we would describe as homosexual behaviour, but neither they nor the society in which they lived defined persons as essentially different in kind from the majority because of their sexual expression... By the late nineteenth century, a profound conceptual shift had occurred. Some men and women *were* homosexuals. The label applied not merely to particular sexual acts, as 'sodomite' once had, but to an entire person whose nature – acts, feelings, personality traits, even body type – was sharply distinguishable from the majority of 'normal' heterosexuals. (Sexual Politics 4, emphasis original)

This "profound conceptual shift" signals the inception of a category of identity as distinct from a disconnected series of sexual acts and practices. Further, it firmly establishes the (here genderless) term "homosexual" as historically and culturally produced. This fundamental understanding grounds almost all scholarly work on gay and lesbian subjectivities, identities, and communities.[4] This project is certainly no exception.

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are of greater interest and utility than the differences.

[4] A notable exception that readily comes to mind is the search for the "gay gene" that preoccupied many scientists in the early 1990s.

While the particular historical and cultural production of the homosexual arises from dominant (primarily scientific) regimes, D'Emilio recognizes this shift as part of a

> longer historical process through which a group of men and women came into existence as a self-conscious, cohesive minority. Before a movement could take shape, that process had to be far enough along that at least some gay women and men could perceive themselves as members of an oppressed minority, sharing an identity that subjected them to systematic injustice ... Thus activists had not only to mobilize a constituency; first they had to create one. (4-5)[5]

In this description, D'Emilio points to two significant prerequisites for a twentieth-century understanding of what it means to be homosexual or lesbian: the first is self-consciousness, and the second is membership in an oppressed minority. Lillian Faderman concurs with D'Emilio's conclusions in her study of specifically lesbian history, stating emphatically that "it was not until second half of the nineteenth century that the *category* of lesbian – or the female sexual invert – was formulated"(2). However, she diverges from D'Emilio's formulation of the consequences of this categorical shift in some interesting and productive ways. While D'Emilio emphasizes the role of shared identity, of naming oneself self-consciously as homosexual or lesbian, Faderman gestures toward a broader and more complex definition of what might constitute a lesbian.

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[5] I include this last sentence in anticipation of one of the over-arching arguments of this project, namely that lesbian pornographers not only capitalized on an existing constituency within the lesbian community, but that in fact they helped to create and shape one.

> The sexologists were certainly the first to construct the conception of lesbian, to call her into being as a member of a special category. As the century progressed, however, women who agreed to identify themselves as lesbian felt more and more free to alter the sexologists' definitions to suit themselves, so that for many women "lesbianism" has become something vastly broader than what the sexologists could possibly have conceived of – having to do with lifestyle, ideology, the establishment of subcultures and institutions. (4)

While D'Emilio is more concerned with tracing a social movement that finds its origin (if not its fullest expression) in the individual identity of its members, and the recognition that this identity is shared by others[6], Faderman gestures toward a far more encompassing model: one that can account for practices ("lifestyle"), meaning making ("ideology"), and community ("the establishment of subcultures and institutions").[7] What Faderman posits here is an important transition. While the term lesbian may have been invented by dominant regimes, once established, it became increasingly nuanced and complicated by those who assumed its mantle, not necessarily through identity, but rather through practices and cultural productions.

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[6] I do not intend here to flatten out the nuance of D'Emilio's argument. His work is largely concerned with analysing the struggle between the discourses of sameness and difference that identity categories produce. What his work points to, however, is the primacy of identity as an organizing concept of modern homosexuality/lesbianism.

While D'Emilio and Faderman both provide historical overviews of the development of homosexuality and lesbianism as categories of identity (however contested) in the twentieth century[8], my interest here is in exploring and defining the term lesbian as an analytic category. Much of the scholarly work in gay and lesbian studies done in the last twenty years has been explicitly critical of an unproblematic (or unproblematized) reliance on the category of identity, and its concomitant espousal of identity politics.[9] One of the primary objections raised to the category of identity is perceived tendency to universalization, thus eliding the very significant differences between and among gays and lesbians. Ed Cohen, for example, comments that "no matter how sensitively we go about it, 'identity politics' has great difficulty in affirming difference(s)" (76). Teresa De Lauretis suggests a fruitful way to conceive of homosexuality not in terms of identity but rather in terms of cultural forms.

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[7] To invoke such broad terms, however, is to risk falling into a completely different trap where definitions of the lesbian are concerned. While this particular gloss of the term lesbian is both useful and enabling, her contention that "women with little sexual interest in other females may nevertheless see themselves as lesbians as long as their energies are given to women's concerns and they are critical of the institution of heterosexuality" (5) replays a number of the problematic assumptions that I will return to repeatedly in this project, notably later in this introduction when I discuss the impact of 1970s feminisms on the term "lesbian," and in Chapter 2 when I engage the debates of the Sex Wars more comprehensively.

[8] There are, of course, a wealth of histories of the development of gay and lesbian subjectivities and communities in the twentieth century, beginning with Jonathan Katz' Gay American History. For specifically lesbian histories in addition to Faderman see Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold:

> homosexuality is no longer to be seen simply as marginal with regard to a dominant, stable form of sexuality (heterosexuality) against which it would be defined either by opposition or homology. In other words, it is no longer to be seen either as merely transgressive or deviant vis-à-vis a proper, natural sexuality (i.e., institutionalized reproductive sexuality),

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The History of the Lesbian Community, and Esther Newton, Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America's First Gay and Lesbian Town, Becki Ross, The House that Jill Built: A Lesbian Nation in Formation, and Martha Vicinus, "'They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong': The Historical Roots of Modern Lesbian Identity."

[9] See for example Judith Butler, Gender Trouble, Diana Fuss, Identification Papers, and Teresa De Lauretis, The Practice of Love.

> according to the older pathological model, or as just another, optional 'life-style,' according to the model of contemporary North American pluralism. Instead, male and female homosexualities – in their current sexual-political articulations of gay and lesbian sexualities, in North America – may be reconceptualized as social and cultural forms in their own right, albeit emergent ones and thus still fuzzily defined, undercoded, or discursively dependent on more established forms. Thus, rather than marking the limits of the social space by designating a place at the edge of culture, gay sexuality in its specific female and male cultural (or subcultural) forms acts as an agency of social process whose mode of functioning is both interactive yet resistant, both participatory yet distinct, claiming at once equality and difference, demanding political representation while insisting on its material and historical specificity. ("Queer Theory" iii)[10]

This definition points to three central ideas: that homosexuality is not simply "not heterosexuality"; that it constitutes "a social and cultural form in its own right"; and that it "acts as an agency of social process." I find this particular signalling of the cultural locatedness of homosexuality an enabling premise to pursue. Moving away from simple categorization, analysing lesbianism as a cultural form and a social process allows us to read both the components that form the culture (language, codes, style, and politics, to name but a few) and the every changing, ever dynamic processes that (re)create that culture. I will elaborate on these ideas more fully in my discussion of "culture" later in this introduction.

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[10] De Lauretis does, of course, come to espouse a far more psychoanalytic perspective, particularly in The Practice of Love.

For the moment, however, I would like to anticipate that discussion here and posit that "lesbian" names not simply people, practices, or identities, but rather ways of knowing, seeing and understanding the world that are communally held (while not monolithic) and based on affinity and belonging more than self-categorization, that is, outward looking rather than inward looking. To be a lesbian, or to be lesbian (to return to the nominative and adjectival functions of the word), is to participate in a dynamic and plastic sexual culture, to recognize its codes and share in its meaning.

Pornography

Obviously, one of the key terms in this project is "pornography," which like the term "lesbian" has a long and vexed history of its own. Moving beyond the insightfulness of Potter Stewart, Lynn Hunt informs us that

> Although desire, sensuality, eroticism, and even the explicit depiction of sexual organs, can be found in many, if not all, times and places, pornography as a legal and artistic category seems to be an especially

> Western idea with a specific chronology and geography .... Pornography was not a given; it was defined over time and by the conflicts between writers, artists and engravers on the one side and spies, clergymen and state officials on the other. Its political and cultural meanings cannot be separated from its emergence as a category of thinking, representation, and regulation. (10-11)

Likewise, Kendrick, in The Secret Museum, his excellent study of the history of pornography, urges us to remember that pornography names not simply an object, but a nebulous category of representation that is historically defined by its own regulation and prohibition. Once an object is recuperated, for instance as "art," then by definition it cannot be pornography. Kendrick further observes through his history that pornography is, in fact, that which a dominant social group (historically wealthy white men) does not want a less dominant group (conventionally women, children and the working-classes) to have access to.[11] And the reason for this, as Susan Sontag has observed, is the threat of knowledge and power that might attend it. "What's really at stake? A concern about the uses of knowledge itself. There's a sense in which *all* knowledge is dangerous, the reason being that not everyone is in the same condition as knowers and potential knowers" (41). Simply put, knowledge in the "wrong" hands can lead to power in the wrong hands.

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[11] While Kendrick is primarily concerned with the class contours of pornography's regulation, he does anticipate many critiques of Radical Feminism (including my own) in his conclusion. Here, he draws a concrete parallel between the dominant class's impulse to control pornography through the 19th and 20th centuries and the politics of Radical Feminism. "This new gentleman – female, as his new protégée is male – still desires to prevent the ignorant and vicious from obtaining access to dangerous representations, and

With these debates and ambivalences in mind, I invoke the term "pornography" deliberately. While many varieties of feminism (to turn to one familiar epistemic regime among many) have consistently struggled with drawing a distinction between what they see as enabling and empowering *erotica* and what they regard as degrading and oppressive *pornography*, I unapologetically use the term "pornography" to signal a political rejection of this distinction. Too often, the line drawn between erotica and pornography is a line that divides the acceptable ("what makes *me* hot") and the unacceptable ("what makes *them* hot"). As such there is, I think, an implicit judgement attached to the term "pornography" and a self-satisfaction to the term "erotica." In invoking the more contested of these terms, I intend to disarm this moralism and to force a real examination of the texts beyond that which is always already known when the twin

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this desire still masks a lust for power. The female gentleman, however, feels himself disenfranchised; power already belongs to the ignorant and the vicious, and it must be wrested from them, though without changing the nature or structure of power in the slightest degree" (239).

terms of "erotica" and "pornography" are invoked.

In addition, I use the term "pornography" to signal defiance: defiance of heteronormative capitalism, defiance of moralistic feminism, and defiance of assimilationist queer politics. I use the term in an oppositional sense, to consistently remind my readers that until very recently (and arguably right up to the present day), the very existence of lesbians was considered by many to be pornographic, that is, obscene, outside the realm of decency. To recuperate lesbian sexual expression into the terms deemed acceptable by mainstream culture is to leave those same structures of acceptability intact. Employing the term "pornography" reminds my readers that I am unwilling to make that sacrifice.

Given the rather vexed discursive territory that pornography inhabits, it is little wonder that while there is a significant body of research dedicated to pornography, there is a dearth of analyses of actual pornographic texts, particularly contemporary print-based texts. I am indebted here to the work of Brian McNair who, in his study of contemporary visual pornography, provides an excellent overview of current social science research on pornography and lays out very clearly how he'll be examining pornography. He provides, I think, a useful model for examining pornography not in disciplinary or academic terms, but rather on its own terms, a model which I emulate. McNair sees his work diverging from most social scientific work on pornography because he aims to understand: 1) the meaning of the text; 2) the uses which its consumers make it; and 3) the context of its reception. In setting out this agenda, he affirms that there is meaning (and the possibility of many meanings) in pornographic texts; he concentrates not on what texts "do" to readers, but also on how readers "use" texts; and finally, he recognizes that the texts themselves speak to cultural contexts, a fact that makes their meanings specific and local rather than universal and quantifiable.

Putting the Lesbian in Lesbian Pornography

Until the 1980s, the term "lesbian pornography" generally meant pornography produced by and for men that featured sexual activity between two women. Indeed, pornography as a whole was (and certainly still is) a largely male domain. This has particular consequences for reading lesbian pornography produced by and for lesbians: lesbians occupy neither the social status, nor the position of sexual "normalcy" that heterosexual men do. Sex and power function very differently for sexual minorities and for women than they do for straight men; combine those two differences and the gulf becomes substantial.

These differences also play themselves out on the textual level, marking the conventions of lesbian pornography as distinct from those of mainstream pornography. For example, one of the most glaring differences between heterosexual and lesbian pornography is in their temporal and spatial contexts. Angela Carter, in The Sadean Woman, and Lynn Hunt, in The Invention of Pornography, both argue that the pornographic world exists outside of time and space. For Carter, this timelessness means that the pornographic narrative is reduced to little more than a fable. Hunt concurs, citing the underworld dungeons and remote castles of Sade as exemplary. When I ask myself whether this is a feature of lesbian pornography, the answer, most often, is no.[12] I'm left with two interesting questions: firstly, what in heterosexuality would require the timeless spaceless setting? And secondly, what in lesbian pornography excludes it as a possibility? I would argue in the first instance that heterosexuality becomes intelligible in no small part by relying on the myth that sex is both natural and transhistorical.[13] In the second instance, lesbian sexuality cannot afford this myth; it always exists in a political context that cannot ignore either history or geography. As a result, it is vital to read lesbian pornography as the product of a particular time, space and politics.

Throughout this project, either explicitly or implicitly, I argue that lesbian sex constitutes a sexual system not only different from, but actively at odds with, heterosexual economies. I take my cue here from Guy Hocquenghem, who takes on the discourses of both psychoanalysis and capitalism to show how homosexuality has been constructed as the other of heterosexuality in order to support a structure of normality. Hocquenghem challenges us to dispense with these normalizing concepts, and instead to "group" the desires of the anus against both the sublimation of homosexuality, which is the demand of phallic sexuality, and the split between individual identity and the social world.

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[12] Neither Carter nor Hunt acknowledges that their conclusions about pornography are based on their readings of exclusively heterosexual texts. They therefore draw conclusions about pornography that should more properly be referred to as conclusions about *heterosexual* pornography.

[13] I shall return to this idea, made explicit in Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's contention that "intimate life is the endlessly cited elsewhere of political public discourse," in Chapter 3.

In this analysis, Hocquenghem links the sublimation of homosexual desire to the privatization of the body (specifically the anus) and to the privatization of capitalism. Homosexual desire, he argues, poses an explicit challenge to these regimes for two distinct reasons: firstly, because the homosexual refuses to sublimate his homosexual desires and ascend to the phallic or Oedipal world, and secondly, because the homosexual does not allow the anus to be privatized. The first challenges the reproductive injunction of heteronormativity and capitalism, the second challenges the fundamental distinction between the private and the public that capitalism depends upon. [14]

The status of lesbians as both sexual dissidents and women leads us to a complex problem where the explicit representation of sex is concerned. On the one hand, it is important as women not to perpetuate the misogynist and sexist world that we inhabit; on the other hand, as sexual dissidents, sexual expression is more vital to the lesbian community than it is to the heterosexual mainstream.[15] On one front, many within the feminist movement were advocating the censorship of pornographic materials and were actively lobbying for various forms of legislation that might curtail the production and distribution of pornography. On another front, many lesbians were beginning to produce a wide range of sexually explicit texts and events, from print based materials, like magazines and anthologies, to photographic exhibits, strip shows, advice columns, and fisting demonstrations. These two fronts come to oppose each other in what have come to be called "The Sex Wars" and form, to my mind, the most important discursive field that lesbian pornography finds itself imbricated in.

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[14] I will return to Hocquenghem, and provide a far more comprehensive overview of this argument, in Chapter 4. For now, however, I would like to indicate that this particular formulation of public and "group" desire is a subtext throughout this project.

Feminism and The Sex Wars

The term "The Sex Wars" has come to summarize the contentious and difficult debates surrounding sexual practices and representation in the 1980s and early 1990s (though I'm sure some would argue that they haven't ended yet). Many features of the Sex Wars are vital to reiterate here, because they shape the creation and reception of lesbian pornography during the era. The first is that the 1970s marked an increased focus within second-wave feminism on sexual harm and sexual representation. The second is that the 1970s also marked the closeting of lesbians within feminism. The third is that the 1970s and early 1980s saw feminist discourse "de-sexualize" lesbianism and turn it from an erotic category to a political one. The fourth is that the eruption of the Sex Wars was largely concerned with lesbian sexual practices (particularly S/M) and representation (particularly lesbian pornography).

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[15] Ironically, even the Canadian Supreme Court has recently recognized this very fact in its ruling on the Little Sisters' case. The court has, however, insisted that national community standards of decency remain the standard by which gay and lesbian sexually explicit material shall be judged.

Each of these phenomena is important both for the way that it influences actual porn producers and for the context that it provides for my analysis. The first is important because it was a key reason why many women, particularly lesbians, felt the need to address the unidimensionality of a politics of sex only capable of expressing itself via threats and harms. It inspired women to produce scholarship and creative works which could also celebrate desire and pleasure. The second phenomenon is important because it created an inside and an outside to feminism. Many women felt that specifically lesbian concerns were cast aside by mainstream feminism, and they sought a forum in which to voice them. The third phenomenon is important because it extended the conditions under which lesbians "qualified" as feminists. Recognizing that casting lesbians to the shadows was not working well as a strategy, mainstream feminism needed to make lesbians "palatable." In so doing, lesbians were held up as model feminists, women-identified-women. If lesbians were the ideal political agents, however, it was because they had been robbed of their erotic and sexual components. Lesbians were so desexualized that Adrienne Rich's "Lesbian Continuum" allowed entry under the sign "lesbian" to all feminist women.[16] But those pesky lesbians kept having sex, of course, and the sexual component of lesbianism simply refused to go away.

The fourth phenomenon, which marks a culmination of the previous three, is of paramount importance to any discussion of lesbian pornography, and that is the demarcation of "good" lesbian sex and "bad" lesbian sex. Once the sign "lesbian" began to stand in for the sign "feminist," both inside and outside of the feminist movement, then the actual sexual practices of lesbians became an explosive political issue. Feminism was able at once to demarcate sado-masochism and pornography as examples of "bad" sex, while at the same time conflating the two into one and the same thing. Any differences between Larry Flint and Gayle Rubin, to cite just two targets of the anti-porn movement, became not only irrelevant but immaterial as well. Anti-porn attacks on individual women, while hurtful and vicious, were strategically aimed not only at these women personally, but also at what they represented: a particular set of lesbian cultural practices and products, became the new "enemy." Just as NOW had attempted to rid itself of lesbian members in the early 1970s, anti-porn feminism was now engaged with purging the perverts from their midst.[17] The unsuccessful results are eerily similar.

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[16] As I've already noted, Faderman also shares this perspective. There are, however, subtle differences between the two. Rich is interested in expanding the category "feminist" to its logical conclusion in the term "lesbian"; Faderman, on the other hand, is expanding the category "lesbian" to include "feminist." This slight difference speaks, I think, to the constituencies that they are addressing.

Given the complex discursive field that lesbian pornography inhabits, it is a challenge to imagine how to go about reading these texts in a productive way. While I have gestured already toward a number of the specific reading strategies that I will employ at various points, it remains here to summarize concretely the overarching methodology that I bring to the project as a whole. In order to capture as much of this complexity as possible, and in order to answer the fundamental question that I laid out earlier (what do these texts say to us?), I have turned to cultural studies.

Methodology: Cultural Studies

Quite simply, this is a cultural studies project.[18] In its broadest terms, cultural studies employs a variety of theoretical and methodological tools based on their efficacy:

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[17] See for example the anonymous pamphlet distributed at the Barnard conference. I will return to these efforts to discredit and exile individual lesbians and particular categories of women in Chapter One when I discuss the anti-porn position in further detail.

[18] For an good overview of the field of cultural studies see Grossberg et. al. "Cultural Studies: An Introduction" in Grossberg et. al. Eds. Cultural Studies. New York: Routledge, 1992.

the methodology required will depend on the questions asked and the material under discussion. Cultural studies takes as its object the cultural productions of a particular group and reads them within *their own* context in order to discover the ways that they are both shaped by and actively construct that very context. In this sense, cultural studies attends to both the meanings and the agency of texts. Consequently, cultural studies is concerned with the political implications of cultural productions and the ways in which social power relations are variously inscribed and resisted within them. These are the principles of investigation that ground this project.

Citing cultural studies as a methodology is perhaps an oxymoron, but an oxymoron that I am willing to inhabit. By definition, a methodology is a method of approach to scholarly inquiry, a procedure for discovery that is applied to the object of study. Cultural studies sees methodologies as primarily utilitarian and strategic – they are deployed as tools where they are most effective and appropriate, but they do not determine the path of scholarly inquiry. As John Storey usefully notes, cultural studies relies more on a series of "basic assumptions" to carry out its work than on a single identifiable methodology (xi). So, while cultural studies may not have a single coherent methodology, it nonetheless demands that the theoretical and methodological frameworks for scholarly work be chosen for their ability to analyse and explain. As such, its rejection of uniform methodologies does constitute a sort of methodology itself. In the spirit of a cultural studies enquiry, this project is guided by a set of "basic assumptions," and employs a collection of theoretical and methodological approaches in the body chapters in order to read the texts themselves. Here, I have divided my basic assumptions into two broad categories for the sake of clarity: those about culture, cultural production and community one the one hand, and those about sex and sexuality on the other. Taken together, these constitute a means of gaining access to the materials while still allowing them to speak for themselves.

Basic Assumption 1: Culture, Cultural Production, Community

"All of the basic assumptions of British Cultural Studies are Marxist" (Storey xi). While Storey notes that not all practitioners of cultural studies are necessarily Marxist (an assertion with which most Marxists, I am certain, would concur), the ideas and concepts that drive cultural studies are nonetheless derivations from and modifications of Marxist thought. Working within cultural studies requires a commitment to thinking of culture as political, and to treating cultural productions as politically charged agents that both actively resist dominant regimes and discourses and actively construct alternative ways of seeing and knowing. As such, the work of culture is always ideological, a concept to which I will return.

In order to think culture politically, however, the term "culture" itself (as it is employed within cultural studies) needs to be defined. Raymond Williams usefully defines culture as "a whole way of life, material, intellectual, and spiritual"

(Keywords16). For Williams, the term "simultaneously invokes symbolic *and* material domains" and "the study of culture involves not privileging one domain over the other but interrogating the relation between the two" (Grossberg et al. 4). Since Williams' seminal work, however, the meaning of the term culture has been further developed and complicated. Within cultural studies today, "culture is understood both as a way of life – encompassing ideas, attitudes, languages, practices, institutions, and structures of power – and a whole range of cultural practices: artistic forms, texts, canons, architecture, mass-produced commodities, and so forth" (Grossberg et. al 5). So, culture is many things, but it is importantly two things at once: it is both those things that constitute a way of life, and those practices that embody and influence it. As such, culture is always a field of contest and resistance, a dynamic set of practices that are constantly forming and reforming. Cultural studies views culture as at once the reflection of social structures and histories, and a key contributor to those same structures and histories. As a result, culture cannot be analysed as an object, but rather as that which is always in process, never complete, never fixed.

This definition of culture grounds my investigation: the idea that culture is both a "whole way of life" and a set of practices. These two simultaneous functions of the term, however, point to an important third concept from Williams that I must integrate here. Culture both generates and describes what Williams names a "structure of feeling" (Marxism and Literature 128). Williams notes that "in most description and analysis, culture and society are expressed in an habitual past tense. The strongest barrier to the recognition of human cultural activity is this immediate and regular conversion of experience into finished products" (128). Williams argues that this procedure is "habitually projected ... into contemporary life" with the result that "analysis is then centred on relations between these produced institutions, formations, and experiences, so that now, as in that produced past, only the fixed explicit forms exist, and living presence is always, by definition receding"(128). To counter this procedure we must "find other terms for the undeniable experience of the present: not only the temporal present, the realization of this and this instant, but the specificity of present being...within which we may indeed discern and acknowledge institutions, formations, positions, but not always as fixed products, as defining products"(128). The term that Williams coins to describe this presence is "structure of feeling."

The structure of feeling is composed of "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt" and is "practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and inter-relating continuity" (132). Far from rendering this sense of presence individualized, however, he specifies that "we are also defining a social experience which is still *in process*, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating" (132 original emphasis). It is "a particular sense of life, a particular community of expression hardly needing expression"("The Analysis of Culture" 52).[19]

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[19] This definition (and the elaboration that follows) of the structure of feeling

> It is as firm and definite as 'structure' suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity. In one sense, this structure of feeling is the culture of a period: it is the particular living result of all the elements in the general organization. And it is in this respect that the arts of a period, taking these to include characteristic approaches and tones in argument, are of major importance. For here, if anywhere, this characteristic is likely to be expressed; often not consciously, but by the fact that here ... the actual living sense, the deep community that makes communication possible, is naturally drawn upon. (53)

What Williams does here is to show that community *is* a structure of feeling, an "actual living sense." He renders community a presence (rather than a formation), a process that expresses "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt." It is in this very specific functional sense (as opposed to a categorical sense) that I use the term "community" in this project.

This sense of community, the structure of feeling, is expressed in its "art,"[20] for

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reminds me uncannily of Pat Califia's remark in "Forbidden Tongues" that " either you know what I'm talking about, or you don't"(11). It is precisely the appeal to a structure of feeling that grounds this perspective.

[20] I put this term in scare quotes to indicate that this term has been significantly problematized since Williams used it. I would substitute the less contentious term

community is at once the building block and the site of culture. It is precisely the structure of feeling of a particular moment and subgenre of lesbian culture that this project seeks to uncover, to explore the ways that it is manifested in cultural productions, and the way that those cultural productions in turn shape and create the very community from which they emerge.

There is a complex, complementary, and overlapping relationship here between the terms culture, cultural production, and community, where the term culture in fact subsumes the other terms. At the risk of flattening this complexity (a complexity which I think is often a productive one) I will use more specific terms than "culture" for the sake of clarity. To speak to the broader culture as a whole (that is, the wider cultural field and not the specifically lesbian/pornographic one) I employ the term "discursive field." This term encompasses the various forces that both act upon and interact with lesbian pornography, such as feminism, capitalism, and the discourse of pornography. I use the term "discursive field" to indicate that I am speaking to the macro context of these works. In order to attend to the micro context, that is, the context of the producers and consumers of lesbian pornography, I use term "community" to indicate that I am interested in a narrow and particular structure of feeling that is unique and separate from that of the culture at large. Finally, I use the term "cultural productions" to refer to the actual texts and practices that express this structure of feeling, this (micro)culture, this community.

"creative expression."

Basic Assumption 2: Disciplining Sexuality

While it is vital to analyse these texts as cultural productions, it is equally important to foreground the fact that pornography is embedded in discourses of sexuality. "Thinking Sex," Gayle Rubin's seminal essay, challenges us to begin to think of sex differently. She highlights the importance of thinking about sex by pointing out that in times of great social unease and disruption, sex becomes an easy outlet for anxieties which do not properly belong to it. She characterizes these anxieties as "moral panics" (a term she borrows from Jeffrey Weeks) and goes on to document how the 20th century marks an historical moment of accentuated panic. In doing so, she demonstrates how dominant power structures attempt to exert themselves at the expense of marginal sexualities. For example, she speaks to a number of myths about sexuality which were circulated as "truth" in the 20th century, including the naturalization of particular forms of sex, the hierarchy of value assigned to particular acts, and the transhistorical and apolitical nature of sex. What she provides in so doing is a framework for imagining how sex and sexuality must be spoken of differently in order to avoid reinscribing those very power structures.

Taking up Rubin's challenge, I begin, like many other critics, with Michel Foucault, because Foucault gives us the tools to talk about sexuality in terms of its complex relationship to the world we inhabit. He gives us a way of understanding how sexuality is constructed, circulated, deployed and disciplined. Sexuality is thus unchained from the realm of the "natural" and the "normal" and can be analysed in terms of how it is produced by both social structures and their concomitant points of resistance. De-linking sex from the realm of the natural serves two purposes for this project. In the first instance, it undermines the very process whereby heteronormativity, individualization and privatization are rendered "natural" by dominant power structures. This exposes the ideological work that this process performs.[21] In the second instance, and central to any project that examines aspects of lesbian culture, this unchaining of sex from the natural exposes the ideologies at work in dominant feminist discourses of the late 1970s and early 1980s, namely, that the more "natural" form of sexuality is one based on equality.[22]

Far from being over-deterministic, however, Foucault also gives us the tools to see how this regulation of sexuality is never completely efficient and complete, reminding us that "where there is power, there is resistance" (The History of Sexuality 97). Foucault's "objective is to analyse a certain form of knowledge regarding sex, not in terms of repression or law, but in terms of power" (HS 92).[23] Thus, we are asked not to examine how we might "liberate" sexuality from oppressive and repressive apparatuses, but rather to analyse and understand how sexuality is produced by the exercise of various sites of power. At each of these sites we will find both the exertion of power and resistance to it.

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[21] I have in mind here Rosemary Hennessy's very useful gloss on ideology as that which "offers individuals an imaginary relationship to the material inequities which they live" (19). Hennessy is, of course, offering a variation on Althusser's Thesis 1: "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (155).

[22] I will return to the underlying assumptions of feminist discourses of sexuality in both Chapters 1 and 2.

Lesbian pornography finds itself at the intersection of mainstream and dissident discourses of lesbianism, feminism, pornography, and cultural production and representation. Each of these discourses at once produces and explains lesbian pornography, yet, at the same time, each is insufficient as either its source or as an explanatory framework. As Foucault cautions:

> Power's condition of possibility, or in any case the viewpoint which permits one to understand its exercise, even in its more 'peripheral' effects, and which also makes it possible to use its mechanisms as a grid of intelligibility of the social order, must not be sought in the primary existence of a central point, in a unique source of sovereignty from which secondary and descendent forms would emanate; it is the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the later are always local and unstable ... [power] is

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[23] Foucault's focus on power both echoes and anticipates cultural studies' concern with relations of power within culture.

> the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society. (HS 93)

This explanation of power alerts us to the confluence of sexuality and culture, for while Foucault suggests using power (a "moving substrate of force relations" that are "always local and unstable") as a method for analysing sexuality, cultural studies requires that an analysis of culture be founded on its dynamic and changing properties. Likewise, just as power's utility as a method "must not be sought in the primary existence of a central point" so too cultural studies' utility is not located in a central point of theoretical purity. In order to adequately analyse and account for a complex culture and its imbrication with a complex sexuality, one must deploy a variety of theoretical frameworks that are able to attend to those complexities. A final concern of cultural studies that finds a corollary in Foucault's definition of power is the insistence on the agency of culture; just as culture is not determined by the social formations that surround it, but is an active participant in shaping those very formations, in Foucault, the social order is not determined by the exercise of a power from above, but is a result of the dynamic interactions of various forms of power.

It is because power is dynamic that discourses about sexuality do not of necessity exclusively discipline and regulate it. On the contrary, "we must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (HS 101). Throughout this project, I argue that lesbian pornography constitutes just such a "stumbling block," a "starting point for an opposing strategy" that is both imbricated in and stands against the realms that I have listed: lesbianism, feminism, pornography, and cultural production.

Foucault identifies two key methods of producing knowledge about sexuality which he calls the *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica*. Foucault argues that the *scientia sexualis* is the dominant Western form of knowledge about sexuality. Within this regime, which includes medical, psychiatric and psychoanalytic discourses, "the perversions" are enumerated, classified and explained, in order to subject them to power. This creates what Rubin has identified as a hierarchy of sexual acts and desires, and encourages adherence to a series of norms and values that are self-perpetuating. Under this regime, the truth of sex is spoken through confession, where the listener can occupy the position of power, the power to grant forgiveness and absolution.[24] The *scientia sexualis* functions in 20th century western cultures as the principal generator of knowledge about sexuality, a knowledge that is primarily concerned with its containment. Foucault, however, does not simply present us with a negative critique: he also provides us with an alternative, *ars erotica*. If we can recognize how lesbianism is constructed and deployed to serve dominant interests as a component of the *scientia sexualis*, I think we must also try to imagine how lesbianism might express itself in the terms of an *ars erotica*. In *ars erotica*, "truth is drawn from pleasure itself, understood as a practice and accumulated as experience; pleasure is not considered in relations to an absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden, nor by reference to a criterion of utility, but first and foremost in relation to itself"(HS 57). Pleasure itself is evaluated for its intensity, its duration, and so forth. In opposition to the *scientia sexualis*, there is no confession of the "truth" of sex, but the transmission of secret. The listener, far from being a confessor, is instead changed by this experience, this knowledge pleasure. The knowledge gained and passed on via the *ars erotica* does not seek to verify or create some external law or truth; rather, the knowledge is reinvested into pleasure itself. Here, and throughout this project, I argue that *ars erotica* is a pedagogical concept. Far from imposing the regulation of a disciplinary regime, it both shares knowledge and allows for the possibility that new knowledge will be acquired and discovered.

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[24] This structure of confession mirrors the therapeutic structure of psychoanalysis, in the sense that the subject confesses, the subject is granted absolution, and the subject is reinscribed in the process. I want to point here to the ways that psychoanalysis functions as a disciplinary force under the *scientia sexualis* in anticipation of Chapter 4, where I argue that the desires unleashed by lesbian sado-masochistic pornography in fact exceed psychoanalysis' capacity for making meaning.

The distinction between the *scientia sexualis* and the *ars erotica* is significant because it provides me a way of distinguishing between ways of making meaning that, deliberately or not, recuperate lesbian pornography into existing structures of knowing, most of which have been antagonistic if not downright oppressive toward lesbian sexuality.[25] These are the discourses of the *scientia sexualis*. In contrast, I am fascinated by the internal meanings generated by these texts, what I will call their secrets, and the method by which they transmit these secrets to their readers. While this is the key argument that grounds my analysis of On Our Backs and Bad Attitude in Chapter 1, it is also a recurrent theme throughout this project.

Bringing the Basic Assumptions Together

A foundational belief of this project is that lesbians are emphatically *not* "just like" heterosexuals, except that we choose to share our erotic lives and expend our erotic energies with other women. Indeed, our position as both sexual dissidents and a less privileged gender have combined to build a community and culture that are distinctly different. We have our own spaces, our own codes, our own history, our own practices and our own conflicts. Lesbian pornography can only be adequately understood as both a product of and a product *for* that very community. It deploys those specificities, codes, histories and so forth, in order to make meaning, and it is more fully understood when it is read with these knowledges in mind. To employ Stuart Hall's terminology, I see my primary texts as "articulations," a process that John Storey usefully summarizes.

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[25] For example, at its most extreme the *scientia sexualis* still criminalizes lesbian sex in many jurisdictions and until the 1970s it was routine practice for homosexuals of both sexes to be subjected to shock treatment under the regime of psychiatry. For a graphic account of this particular atrocity see Persimmon Blackbridge and Sheila Gilhooly, Still Sane. Interestingly, Persimmon Blackbridge is a member of Kiss & Tell.

> The process is called 'articulation' because meaning has to be expressed, but it is always expressed in a specific context, a specific historical moment, within a specific discourse(s). Thus expression is always connected (articulated) to and conditioned by context" (xii).

This context is the lesbian community.

Teralee Bensinger highlights the importance of the lesbian community as a whole when she argues that instead of looking for the lesbian spectator as the subject of the gaze in lesbian pornography, we should instead imagine a community as the subject of that gaze. In so arguing, she shifts her analysis from one based on individual readers of individual texts to one based on community of readers and producers. Bensinger suggests that we imagine the lesbian community as the setting fantasy. This shift from the individual to the communal has two implications for my reading. In a macro sense (by which I mean in the context of a "real" or social world), this means that the community itself creates the space which makes the production of pornography both possible and desirable. In turn, pornography circulates within that community, changing the very structure which allowed for its production and in turn creating the possibility of other pornographic productions. In a micro-sense (the textual world of lesbian pornography)

Bensinger suggests, and I will argue, that lesbian pornography uses the community itself for its setting, as a kind of *mise en scène* of lesbian sexuality, desire and pleasure.

To take the implications of this way of seeing one step further, I argue throughout this project that lesbian pornography serves as an emblem of public, rather than private, sexuality. By virtue of its material production and circulation, it produces a public sphere of both lesbian sexuality and lesbian representation that expresses the structure of feeling of the community. At the same time, it represents lesbian sexual practices as public and communal, resisting both the heteronormative demand that sex be rendered individual and private and the lesbian (and gay) assimilationist politics that require the same thing.

Productive Possibilities

My project encompasses what I take to be an identifiable moment in lesbian pornography: 1981-1995.[26] It begins with the 1981 publication Coming to Power, begins in earnest academically with the 1982 Barnard conference on sexuality, and ends (or is at least immeasurably altered) with the commercialization and co-optation of lesbian desire with the rise of "Lesbian Chic" in the early 1990s.[27] These dates serve the purpose of marking a distinct period for analysis. Surely 1981 did not arise from nowhere, and likewise, the process of lesbian chic does not begin and end with a feature on ABC's newsmagazine *20/20*. Nonetheless, Coming to Power and the inception of "Lesbian Chic" are watersheds which change significantly the events which follow them, and serve in some way to mark what I see as a cohesive era: an era of explicit challenge by lesbians over how the lesbian community understands itself and, importantly, an era before wholesale commodification and profitability.

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[26] The "high porn" era in Canada, while certainly entwined with its American counterpart, extends much further into the 1990s, largely due to the February 1992 Supreme Court decision in Butler, and because of Canada Customs' harassment of gay and lesbian bookstores, an on-going phenomenon, but one which the Supreme Court ruled on in 2001. My analysis of Canadian performance art collective Kiss & Tell will attend to these specifically Canadian circumstances.

This is a project that reads sexually explicit print-based material produced: i) in the United States and Canada; ii) by lesbians ; and iii) primarily for the consumption of other lesbians. The works and authors I've chosen, the lesbian porn magazines Bad Attitude and On Our Backs, the Canadian performance art collective Kiss & Tell, New York-based writer, historian and archivist Joan Nestle, and San Francisco-based writer and activist Pat (now Patrick) Califia, are all concerned with the representation of lesbian sex and are committed to the production and circulation of sexually explicit materials. I see them as exemplary of this particular moment of sexually explicit cultural production.[28]

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[27] The notorious cover of New York Magazine, proclaiming "Lesbian Chic" and featuring k.d. lang on the cover, appeared May 10, 1993. *Newsweek* followed this with a cover story on lesbians in June 1993, featuring a sidebar article on Northhampton Mass. Less well known is the fact that the *National Enquirer* actually broke the mainstream media story on Lesbian Chic in 1992 with the lurid (yet tantalizing!) headline "Lesbianville USA: Strange Town Where Men Aren't Wanted."

In analysing these texts, I argue that lesbian pornography structures the knowledge of pleasure uniquely: while mainstream society structures the knowledge of pleasure through heteronormativity, privatization (and by extension monogamy) and individuality, lesbian pornography portrays pleasures which are lesbian, communal and public. Through documenting, narrating and circulating this other knowledge of pleasure, lesbian pornography actively produces community. Each of the chapters in this work deals with one specific aspect of that general argument. Chapter 1, "Cultural Contexts, Cultural Productions: The Magazines," examines the lesbian porn magazines Bad Attitude and On Our Backs, along with Susie Bright's Susie Sexpert's Lesbian Sex World. This chapter focusses on the role of cultural production and circulation and argues that in making a variety of sexual practices, ideas and knowledges available to a wide spectrum of readers, these works actively engage with and change the community that they address. Chapter 2, "Good Girls Don't: Kiss & Tell," analyses the work of Kiss & Tell, and examines the ways that their work engages with debates around representation and state regulation. It ultimately argues that in undermining various strategies of containment, Kiss & Tell demonstrate a different way of imagining community. Chapter 3, "Countermemory, History, Community: Joan Nestle," looks at the work of Joan Nestle and argues that sexual memory and sexualized history are cornerstones of the lesbian community. In making the past available and accessible in the present, Nestle enables us to resist the conservative impulse to leave the past behind and become fully assimilated consumers. Finally, Chapter 4, "Fucking Excessive: Resistant Sexuality in Pat Califia," examines Califia's pornographic narratives, arguing that the graphic depiction of lesbian sado-masochism circulates and encourages a form of sexuality that is anoedipal, and therefore an alternative to privatized, capitalist and heteronormative sexuality. It is important to note, however, that while each of these chapters has a central focus, each of these aspects finds its way into my analysis of other works as the works themselves demand. So, while I may be explicitly concerned with cultural production and circulation when I analyse the magazines, this nonetheless remains an important subtext throughout the rest of the project. Likewise, the politics of representation that I look at when I deal with Kiss & Tell find their way into the chapters that follow. In my conclusion, I ultimately want to suggest the reason for the demise of lesbian porn in this particular form in the mid to late 1990s, namely the commercialization of lesbianism within consumer culture. It remains for another project to look at what might replace this particular genre of lesbian pornography within lesbian culture.

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[28] I have deliberately avoided authors like Sarah Schulman, Dorothy Alison, Jane deLynn and Kathy Acker, because their work is not, first and foremost, focussed on the sexually explicit, although sexual explicitness certainly forms a part of it.

For now, however, do not anticipate the end of this era. Instead, I invite you to come along on a journey of memory, defiance, and pleasure. I hope that in some way, this project can emulate the texts within it, and offer its own arousing possibilities for "thinking sex," and thinking porn.

Chapter 1

Cultural Contexts, Cultural Productions: The Magazines

> Above all, On Our Backs straddles a wide field of What Lesbians Should Be Able To Know. (Letter to the Editor, 5.4, 5)

In this chapter, I analyse lesbian sex magazines, specifically On Our Backs and Bad Attitude, in order to discover the cultural work that they do and the communities that they help to build. My focus is on the magazines as cultural productions which at once represent and, through their circulation, affect their community. I begin by putting these cultural productions into their most immediate political context, feminism's Sex Wars, in order to explain their genesis and their function as a counter-discourse to Radical Feminism. I then, however, move beyond this all too familiar form of analysis to ask the following questions: what do these magazines *do*, and *how* do they do it? In order to address these questions, I deploy Stuart Hall's theorization of the communication process by analysing its structural and discursive components – what he terms the circulation, consumption, and reproduction of "sign vehicles." Specifically, I read both the features of the magazines and, more importantly, the letters to the editor, which provide a wealth of information on both the impact of the magazines on their readers and the uses to which the readers put them.[29] Ultimately, I suggest that the process of communication that the magazines engender functions as an important component of a lesbian *ars erotica*, producing a new community by changing both the imaginative possibilities and the sexual practices of their readership.

In his influential essay, "Encoding/Decoding," Hall argues that the communication process (or the circuit of communication) must be understood as both structural and discursive. That is, in order to fully understand the work that a particular communicative object performs, one must examine it in terms of the structural forces that influence both its production and reception; at the same time, however, and more importantly for Hall, we must attend to the discursive meanings that are written into the object through production, as well as those that are elicited by it in its consumer. Hall names the structural and discursive work of production "encoding" and the structural and discursive work of reception "decoding." Ultimately, Hall argues that "it is possible (and useful) to think of this process in terms of a structure produced and sustained through the articulation of linked but distinctive moments – production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction"[30] (91). While the process is composed of "connected practices," each stage nonetheless "retains its distinctiveness and has its own specific modality, its own forms and conditions of existence" (91). In identifying these "determinate moments" (91) in the circuit of communication, Hall provides a model of textual analysis that recognizes both the distinctiveness and the interconnection between and among these stages. He identifies meaning making as a process, and rejects the notion that meanings simply inhere in texts at the point of production. While it is important to recognize that there are phases to this process, it is nonetheless vital to recognize them as articulations, that is, connected expressions. We must begin by recognizing and analysing seemingly discrete stages, but never at the expense of an analysis that joins the process of reception back to the process of production.

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[29] While I provide a close reading of several selected letters in this chapter, it is important to note that these "individual" readings are based on an analysis of all of the published letters to the editor over a period of some 10 years. As a result, these letters should be read as representative of readers' feedback to the magazines rather than as exceptional narratives.

So, the conditions of production for various messages are partly structural, that is, a set of social (production) relations are put into play. More importantly, however, "the apparatuses, relations and practices of production thus issue ... in the form of symbolic vehicles constituted within the rules of 'language'"(91). Hall emphasizes that "it is in the *discursive* form that the circulation of the product takes place, as well as its distribution to different audiences" (91). The product must then be "decoded" by its consumers, for "if no 'meaning' is taken, there can be no 'consumption.' If the meaning is not articulated in practice, it has no effect" (91). It is worth noting here that Hall is primarily concerned with how dominant discourses circulate in mass media, particularly television broadcasting. As a result, the individual stages that he identifies are far more discrete than those of my analysis. Hall himself notes that the degree of symmetry between encoded meanings and decoded meanings will vary depending on the symmetry between the producer-encoder and the receiver-decoder (93). It is precisely where the gap between encoder and decoder is at its broadest that the distinct stages of the communication process become most apparent. Applied to lesbian pornography, and the way that it is read by a specifically lesbian audience, the discursive gap is a narrow one, and the stages of the process not so discrete as Hall's model would allow. Nonetheless, his theorization of the process itself, if not its individual component parts, is highly useful in analysing the cultural work that these texts do. What Hall highlights is that the process, or circuit, is primarily discursive: discourses are put out into the world, where they circulate *as discourses*; they are then consumed by virtue of the meanings that are "taken" from them; next, those meanings are "articulated in practice" by the consumers, resulting in both discursive and material change within the context of reception; lastly, those discursive and material changes circle back into the production themselves (reproduction), altering what is "encoded" into future "symbolic vehicles."

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[30] It is important here to remember Hall's particular usage of the term "articulation" to mean both expression *and* connection. See page 34 of the Introduction for a useful gloss of the term.

What Hall theorizes here is a way of reading texts in process, not as static objects produced in one arena and consumed in another, but as transitive objects, vehicles that can only be understood by the actions that they undertake and produce. To this end, I begin by employing Hall's term "production" in a straightforward way; I analyse the specific structural and discursive contexts from which the magazines issue. I then depart, however, from Hall's strict terminology by simultaneously analysing what Hall would term the magazines' "circulation," "consumption," and "reproduction." That is, I read the discursive meanings that are made available to readers alongside of the discursive use to which readers put them (as read through the letters) in order to understand the effect, in practice, of these productions. It is only through understanding the interplay between the texts themselves and their readers that we can recognize the material and discursive effects of the magazines. In order to analyse the interplay between text and reader, I identify three discursive strategies that the magazines employ: liberation, circulation, and education. I see liberation as the most apparent (and most frequently analysed) discursive meaning that the magazines make available to their readers. I use the term "circulation" to denote both the meanings that the texts make available to their readers (what I call demonstration) as well as the discursive meanings that further circulate within the community as a result of their articulation by the magazines, for example, conversations among readers and community events sponsored by the magazines. As such, I regard circulation here as a far more interactive process than Hall lays out. Finally, I suggest that the whole communicative process of the magazines can be seen as an *ars erotica*, effectively producing an altered discursive and structural context, or community.[31]

Production: Structural Contexts

As Hall notes, production issues from both structural and discursive contexts. While the emphasis in this chapter will fall on the discursive contexts, two structural contexts are worth noting briefly here – not because they contribute to an analysis of what the texts do and how they do it (the purpose of the chapter), but simply because they provide an explanation of the structural forces that allow for these magazines to be produced at this particular historical moment. The first of these structures is the existence of a broader lesbian community, that is, a constituency of consumers for the product; the second is the coincidental availability of desktop publishing technology in the early 1980s. While the formation and development of gay and lesbian communities has been well documented elsewhere,[32] the impact of technological advances may not be such common knowledge. In her preface to On Our Backs: The Best Erotic Fiction, Heather Findlay states that "My old boss Debi [Debi Sundahl, founder and original co-publisher of On Our Backs] used to claim that On Our Backs was the first publication ever to be laid out on a desktop computer" (x). She tells the following irresistible story of the coincidence of technological innovation and pro-sex politics:

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[31] I remind my readers here of my definition of community as a presence (rather than a formation) or a "structure of feeling." See Introduction pp 26-28.

[32] See, for example, Becki Ross, The House that Jill Built, John D'Emilio, Sexual Politics/ Sexual Communities, and Lillian Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers.

> In 1983, Debi was working as a stripper at the Mitchell Brothers' theater in San Francisco. She was making good, if not spectacular, money, and it was mostly in cash. When she heard that some little computer company called Apple was putting out a desktop you could use to lay out a magazine and that Apple would be selling some hot off the assembly line at a new convention called MacWorld, Debi put $8000 in small bills in her purse and walked down to San Francisco's convention hall. From a foldout table she bought one of these computers from a young, enthusiastic man named Steve. (x)

Findlay recognizes this story as a moment that "changed things for dykes for good" (x), because the new technology allowed for a much cheaper production process for shoe-string-budget magazines.

Discursive Contexts: The Sex Wars

The discursive contexts of production is far more closely tied to the meanings that are encoded in and decoded from the magazines, and the Sex Wars are the single most influential of those contexts. Their politics, which pitted "good girls" against "bad girls," infuses a field of contest over lesbian cultural production, representation, and sexual practices. It is the contest over cultural production which provides the most compelling framework for understanding the work of the magazines.[33] As cultural products which loudly and deliberately speak back to Radical Feminism's anti-porn stance, the magazines function as foundational articulations of the pro-sex position. While these texts serve as a liberatory counter-discourse to Radical Feminist ideologies, they also function as a productive force which constructs community through conversation, circulation, and education.

The debates of feminism's Sex Wars are by now well rehearsed, and I run the risk here of re-hashing either too much or too little. However, since lesbian pornography is necessarily understood in terms of these debates, I shall first briefly trace the broad historical events which lead to the eruption of the Sex Wars, with a specific focus on the parts that lesbians and lesbian sexual practices play in this development. I shall then move on to an analysis of the anti-porn perspective, and its slippage from an anti-porn politics to an anti-lesbian S/M and anti-lesbian porn politics. I will then turn to the magazines as an embodiment of the pro-sex position, in preparation for the final, and most important question: what might lesbian pornography give us to think which neither a pro-sex nor an anti-porn position could account for?

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[33] I will go on to an analysis of the specifically *representational* politics of the Sex Wars in my discussion of Kiss & Tell in Chapter 2.

History

Teralee Bensinger dates the beginning of the Sex Wars to the intervention by the so-called "lavender menace" at the National Organization of Women's (NOW) 1970 convention. NOW had been trying to minimize the number of visible lesbians in its membership at the time, fearing that they would give feminism a bad name. In response, a group of lesbians, angry at this attempted purging, stormed the stage and took charge of the microphone, reading their "woman-identified-woman" manifesto, thus claiming a space for lesbians within the feminist movement. Bensinger argues that this action marks the moment where lesbian-feminists transformed lesbianism from an erotic category to a political one.[34] Lesbians argued for their inclusion within feminism on the basis of their gendered position as women; moreover, the "woman-identified woman" manifesto "defined lesbianism as 'quintessential feminism'"(Bensinger 74). These lesbians argued that they were in a privileged position to understand and critique the oppression of patriarchal society:

> She [the lesbian] is caught somewhere between accepting society's view of her – in which case she cannot accept herself – and coming to understand what this sexist society has done to her and why it is functional and

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[34] Adrienne Rich's "lesbian continuum" demonstrates how this works within feminism to render lesbian sex as one end of the spectrum of political emotion which could fall under the sign "lesbian."

> necessary for it to do so. Those of us who work that through find ourselves on the other side of a tortuous journey through a night that may have been decades long. The perspective gained from that journey, the liberation of self, the inner peace, the real love of self and of all women, is something to be shared with all women – because we are all women. (Radicalesbians)

Or, as Charlotte Bunch argues: "Lesbian love is for ourselves, for women. It is abused precisely because it is outside of male control"(92). Defining lesbianism politically, however, had the effect of placing lesbians almost outside of sexuality altogether. Lesbian sexuality became negatively defined as non-patriarchal, non-male-identified, and non-oppressive. This opposition to patriarchal models left very little room for articulating what lesbian sexuality might *be* as opposed to what it *was not*[35]. By virtue of this politics, lesbianism became, to mainstream feminists, a practice based on love, equality, respect and emotional connection; the sex and sweat all but disappeared.

There were significant consequences to the shift towards lesbianism as a privileged political category at the expense of its erotic specificity, and these consequences played themselves out on both lesbians and feminism as a whole. For lesbians, it created a hierarchy whereby "good" lesbians subsumed their erotic identities within a political field, while "bad" lesbians maintained practices which feminism considered "male-identified" – bar culture and butch/femme roles, for example. This shift created the category "lesbian-feminist," a category which both presumed and mandated a particular politics (if not a particular erotics). One was not a lesbian and also a feminist; one was a lesbian-feminist, a compound whereby each term relied on the other for its intelligibility. As Rich argues elsewhere:

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[35] Paradoxically, it was still predicated on a notion of sexual difference, an irony which Bensinger also identifies.

> It is also crucial that we understand lesbian/feminism in the deepest, most radical sense: as that love for ourselves and other women, that commitment to the freedom of all of us, which transcends the category of "sexual preference" and the issue of civil rights, to become a politics of *asking women's questions*, demanding a world in which the integrity of all women – not a chosen few – shall be honored and validated in every aspect of culture. (On Lies 17)

The rise of this category of feminist, and the attendant politics of separatism, had consequences for feminism as a whole as well, since it allowed for a critique of (hetero)sexuality from the newly privileged position of the woman-identified-woman.

While these developments were not solely responsible for feminism's increased interest in fighting pornography in the 1970s, they contributed significantly to its development. The "view from elsewhere" which lesbian-feminism purportedly afforded allowed analysis to turn toward the roles which women and men played sexually, rather than socially, and the ways that those roles were perpetuated. Male sexuality was vilified by Radical Feminism as inherently oppressive, unequal, and violent. In Catharine MacKinnon's words, "the social relation between the sexes is organized so that men may dominate and women must submit and this relation is sexual – in fact, is sex. Men in particular, if not men alone, sexualize inequality, especially the inequality of the sexes"(3). This was nowhere more evident than in pornography, which was seen as both the expression of patriarchy's misogynistic sexuality, and the method whereby individual men (and to a lesser extent women) were indoctrinated into its ideology.

The anti-pornography movement gained strength through the late 1970s and became the almost singular public voice of feminism. It is important at this point to note that one of the fundamental discursive contexts that lesbian pornography responds to is the grassroots activism and doctrine of the anti-pornography forces, as opposed to a more nuanced and academically theorized Radical Feminism as it is consolidated through the 1980s. This is a key distinction, because while Radical Feminist arguments against pornography became increasingly complex over the course of the 1980s,[36] the grassroots activism of the late 1970s was still largely concerned with such tactics as firebombing porn shops, and publishing and distributing incendiary leaflets.[37] Two influential organization in this mold were founded in the 1970s: Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media (WAVPM), a San Francisco based anti-pornography organization, was formed in 1976, and its New York counterpart Women Against Pornography (WAP) was formed in 1979. By 1980, the influential Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography had been published, including pieces by such luminaries as Gloria Steinem, Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker and Audre Lorde. This collection, however, was still firmly grounded in an activist framework, rather than an analytic one. The axiomatic claim of the collection is that pornography bears a causal relationship to violence against women, and the purpose of the collection is clearly a call to action, rather than an intellectual engagement with the "problem" of pornography.[38]

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[36] For example, the Minneapolis Ordinance, which allowed people to bring civil action against producers, distributors and consumers of pornography as a violation of civil rights (including the provision that any woman could bring a suit "as a woman acting against the subordination of women") was introduced in 1984. Catharine MacKinnon's Feminism Unmodified was published in 1987.

Although this particular strand of feminism gained force and power through the 1970s, it did not manage to entirely homogenize the feminist movement; indeed, its consolidating orthodoxy began to produce its own dissent. Many lesbians (and heterosexual feminists) on both sides of the "good girl/bad girl" divide became increasingly uncomfortable with the dilution of lesbian sexuality and its displacement from erotics to politics. Unwilling to go along with the sanitized notion of women-identified-women, this loose group of activists also contested the rhetoric of women as sexual victims, possessed of little or no sexual agency, and the dismissal and demonization of many women's sexual practices.

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[37] Ironically, the co-founders of On Our Backs carried out just such a firebombing in Minneapolis in 1981. See Findlay, "Preface" pp vii-viii.

[38] I offer this observation not as a slight or easy reason to dismiss the anti-porn position, but rather to highlight that resistance to anti-porn politics was largely composed of resistance to a dogmatic and simplified position. This is the resistance that is most at play in the magazines themselves and their consumers. I will engage with resistance to more complex political/theoretical positionings in subsequent chapters.

By the late 1970s and the early 1980s, these disaffections had come to the forefront of feminism and the Sex Wars, as we know them, began in earnest. While they did not arise from nowhere,[39] three significant events of the early 1980s significantly structured the ground which the Sex Wars contested: the 1981 publication of Samois' Coming to Power, the May 1981 publication of Heresies' sex issue, and the 1981 "The Scholar and the Feminist" conference on sexuality sponsored by the Barnard College Women's Center. Each of these events marks an attempt by lesbians and feminists to broaden the discourse on sex and sexuality from one narrowly concerned with violence and abuse to one which was also capable of exploring how sexuality might also function positively in women's lives. Coming to Power explores lesbian S/M[40], Heresies, a well-respected feminist journal, published a special issue exploring the broad themes of sex and sexuality including some sexually explicit creative works, and the Barnard Conference on Sexuality, thematically organized under the name "Pleasure and Danger" was intended to explore "the ambivalent and contradictory extremes women experience in negotiating sexuality" (Vance xvi).[41] These events marked the first widespread and coherent intervention into feminist debates on pornography and sexuality by women who were critical of the increasingly doctrinaire Radical Feminist position.

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[39] For example, Samois, a lesbian S/M activist organization, had published What Color is Your Handkerchief: A Lesbian S/M Sexuality Reader in 1979; Pat Califia, another prominent S/M activist, had published Sapphistry, which included frank discussions and instructions on S/M, among other sexual practices, in 1980; and several articles had appeared in publications like *The Advocate*.

The Anti-Porn Position

These interventions into feminist discourses prompted a swift reaction from many anti-porn activists, who managed to conflate pornography, violence against women, S/M, pedophilia, and general "sexual deviance" into a single undifferentiated category, named

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[40] In fact, Samois specifically names itself as a lesbian-feminist S/M organization, and calls Coming to Power "a statement, a confrontation, and a challenge. It calls for a re-evaluation of existing lesbian-feminist ethics, saying, 'You must own your 'illegitimate' children'" (13).

[41] For an excellent overview of the backlash against the Barnard Conference and its implications, see Vance "Epilogue" and "More Danger, More Pleasure: A Decade After the Barnard Sexuality Conference" in Pleasure and Danger (originally published as the conference proceedings, and republished 10 years later with additional materials).

“anti-feminist” and “anti-woman,” which made no distinction between representations and practices. By erasing this distinction, the anti-pornography forces set the table for the primary points of contest in the Sex Wars: lesbian pornography and lesbian sado-masochism. The alliance between anti-porn feminism and lesbian-feminism was clear and ruthless in its attacks: lesbian S/M was the new enemy, and lesbian S/Mers were traitors. For example, a handbill produced by Women Against Violence Against Women, Women Against Pornography and New York Radical Feminists, handed out to protest the Barnard Conference, reads in part:

> we believe that this conference is ... endorsing a tiny offshoot of the women’s movement that is a part of the backlash against radical feminism.
>
> Represented at this conference are organizations that support and produce pornography, that promote sex roles and sadomasochism, and that have joined the straight and gay pedophile organizations in lobbying to end laws that protect children from abuse by adults.[42]

The handbill goes on to single out Samois and its representative at the conference, Gayle Rubin, the Lesbian Sex Mafia and its representative, Dorothy Allison, and unnamed

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[42] A remarkable slippage occurs in this last sentence, where straight sex (pornography and its producers) slides into lesbian sex (sex roles and sado-masochism) which in turn gives way to children’s sex, swapping in an ever more innocent “victim” to produce outrage and action.

"individuals [though I will name at least one of them as Joan Nestle] who champion butch-femme sex roles." Again, it is important to reiterate that there were few specific charges laid out against these practices, save for the general accusation that these practices were inherently oppressive, anti-feminist, and male-identified, an indictment which Radical Feminism took to be commonsensical.

The introduction to the 1982 the anthology Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis makes clear the politics which would infuse the Sex Wars for at least the next 15 years.

> Throughout Against Sadomasochism it is argued that lesbian sadomasochism is firmly rooted in patriarchal sexual ideology, with its emphasis on the fragmentation of desire from the rest of our lives and the single-minded pursuit of gratification, sexual or otherwise.... [T]he recent interest by some women in sadomasochism is testimony to the profoundly alienated and objectified conceptions of erotic desire that our culture has produced and from which lesbians and feminists are by no means exempt. (4)

Here, we find two key planks of the anti-S/M position: firstly, S/M is an outgrowth of patriarchy, and secondly, that the lesbians who participate in it have been "duped" by the patriarchy. By extension then, any sexually explicit representations which were at all influenced by S/M were labelled "pornography" and necessarily replicated all of the evils found in heterosexual pornography.[43]

A number of assumptions and goals lie hidden within the anti-porn agenda which are germane to my discussion of lesbian pornography. There are four things at stake in the anti-porn position which I think are crucial to our understanding of lesbian pornography. The first is a particular analysis of power which imagines that power operates in a top down direction; those with power exert it on and against those who do not. The second is the corollary assumption that those without power are also without agency. The third is that anti-porn perspectives are founded solely on the notion of negative critique: they propose to dismantle patriarchal and misogynist power, but do not necessarily imagine what might be productively generated in its place. And lastly, I will argue that one of the key stakes for feminism in the Sex Wars is in fact the recuperation and redeployment of heterosexuality, often at the expense of the very feminist principle which Radical Feminism espouses.

A simplistic notion of power rests at the heart of the anti-porn position. Power is located in the structures and expressions of a patriarchal and misogynist culture, and that power is both exercised and reinforced through the sexual domination of women via sexual violence and pornography. As MacKinnon herself argues,

> Pornography turns sex inequality into sexuality and turns male dominance into sexual difference. Put another way, pornography makes inequality

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[43] I will return to an analysis of S/M practices in Chapter 4.

> into sex, which makes it enjoyable, and into gender, which makes it seem natural. By packaging the resulting products as pictures and words, pornography turns gendered and sexualized inequality into "speech," which has made it right. Thus does pornography, cloaked as the essence of nature and the index of freedom, turn the inequality between men and women into those twin icons of male supremacy, sex and speech, and a practice of sex discrimination into a legal entitlement. (3)

The anti-porn position refuses to engage with conceptions of power which recognize it as "a multiplicity of force relations"(History 92). According to Foucault, "power's condition of possibility ... must not be sought in the primary existence of a central point, in a unique source of sovereignty from which secondary and descendent forms would emanate"(History 93). And yet, this is exactly what the anti-porn position proposes: patriarchy is the central point, pornography is the secondary form which emanates from it, and S/M (and the rest of Radical Feminism's litany of evils) are the descendants.

This simplified conception of power relations leads to another fundamental assumption: that women are without agency when it comes to pornography. The only viable agency which can be exercised is a straightforward fight against pornography. This assumption robs women of the possibility of a more complex relationship to pornography as either producers, models or consumers: all are simply dupes or victims of the patriarchy. There is no room here for an analysis which recognizes that some women might choose sex work, either as a "free"[44] choice, or as a lesser evil to other forms low-paying exploited labour. Robbing women of sexual agency in the realm of the sexually explicit seems to me a dangerous politics indeed.

Mired in a politics which imagines both a simple unidirectional exercise of power and a complete lack of agency on the part of the "victims" of that power, it is no surprise that Radical Feminism provides much in the way of negative critique and little in the way of seductive possibilities. This negative critique is quick to point out the ways in which sexuality has been warped by a misogynist and patriarchal culture, but it proposes few specific alternatives. The most it seems to offer is a hazy concept of eroticism which defines itself in opposition to the "male-identified" tropes which it so readily scrutinizes. The result is a notion of eroticism (as opposed to sexuality) which values equality, communication, and above all, love and commitment – culturally gendered tropes which supposedly render heterosexual marriage desirable for women. [45]

It is perhaps this unwitting backlash against lesbian "sex" and in favour of heterosexual "love" which serves as the underlying and unspoken agenda of the Sex Wars. In attacking and highlighting "politically incorrect" lesbianism, Radical Feminism succeeds in containing the "threat" of lesbians in a novel fashion so as to recuperate heterosexuality. While the feminist movement of the early 1970s had failed in its attempt to purge lesbians from feminist organizations, Radical Feminism of the 1980s at least succeeded in bringing lesbians back to the level of heterosexual feminists in terms of their credentials. And this restoration of equality between straight and lesbian women had another consequence too. If the lesbian can be a dupe of patriarchy in the same way that heterosexual women can, then perhaps heterosexual women can also access a privileged political position, just like the lesbians of the 1970s.

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[44] I will return to the myth of "free" choice when I discuss the inherent liberalism of much of the pro-sex perspective.

[45] I shall discuss the implications of these tropes of heterosexual marriage more fully in Chapter Two when I discuss the work of Kiss & Tell.

Enter Lesbian Porn

These discursive contexts, the de-sexualization of lesbians, the simplified conception of power, the recuperation of heterosexuality, and the vilification of a significant portion of the lesbian community, form the most significant discursive context at the moment of production. In fact, I would argue that they constitute what Hall names a "dominant cultural order" (98) *within feminism*. That is, "there exists a pattern of preferred meanings; and these both have the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them and have become institutionalized" (98). To provide adequate opposition, lesbian pornography is encoded to engage with and to refute the anti-porn position in ways that are consistent with the pro-sex politics which the Sex Wars call for, while at the same time, particularly in the ways that it is decoded by its readers, it exceeds those politics and engenders new communities, erotics, and politics which are not articulated within the debates of the Sex Wars. In this sense, lesbian pornography acts both as a rejoinder to Radical Feminism, and as a productive force. The texts which I will be examining in the remainder of this chapter, the magazines On Our Backs and Bad Attitude, and the monograph Susie Sexpert's Lesbian Sex World, a collection of articles originally published in On Our Backs, accomplish this in three interrelated yet distinct ways: through liberation, circulation and education. While there had in the past been books, articles and conferences which had helped to solidify a lesbian pro-sex movement, these magazine mark the first consistent and reliable embodiment of that movement over a significant period of time.

The politics of liberation are the most overt, and consequently the most frequently analysed of these. They hold that lesbian sex and sexually explicit representation must be freed from the vilified position which they occupy under the constraints of a dogmatic Radical Feminist regime. These politics form many of the fundamental struts of the pro-sex position, and weaknesses inhere in them as a result of their reliance on liberalism. Just as I have laid out the fundamental tenets and problems of the anti-porn perspective, I shall lay them out for the pro-sex position. However, I will then move on to an analysis of what I find far more interesting in terms of the action which these texts take – what Stuart Hall would call decoding – that is, the productive work that they do to build a community through circulation and education. In the end, I argue that these texts must not be dismissed as simply articulating a liberal pluralist politics, but must be analysed for the complex ways in which they actively produce an alternative lesbian culture.

Liberation, Circulation and Education: On Our Backs and Bad Attitude

Liberation

The liberatory politics of lesbian pornography share with the pro-sex position a basic allegiance to the concepts of freedom and individual rights.[46] These positions contend that women should have the basic right and freedom to explore and experience their sexuality in order to determine what may or may not constitute desirable sexual acts and fantasies, and pornography is one venue where this exploration can take place. For example, the editors of On Our Backs state in their inaugural editorial that "towards the goals of sexual freedom, respect and empowerment for lesbians, we offer On Our Backs" (1.1 4). In many ways, the discourse of freedom and rights is a logical one to take up, since it is the structural discourse not only of pornographers, but also of Gay *Liberation* and mainstream feminism, or Women's *Liberation*. A politics which is formed at the intersection of these movements is bound to be heavily influenced by those movements' foundational assumptions.

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[46] I will return to these concepts and their dangers in my discussion of citizenship in Chapter Two.

And yet, it is precisely this reliance on the concept of freedom which opens the pro-sex position up to scurrilous attack. Sara Dunn, for example, claims that "liberals have long equated pornography with the progressive and the good" (162), a statement which relies on a political dismissal of "liberals" in order to dismiss pornography's potential for being progressive. Dunn then goes on to voice the main critique of what little critical work has been done on lesbian pornography: lesbian pornography is a failed political project because "it assumes that sex writing is *in itself* radical; that to write of sex and sexual identities is always a subversive act" (162). Simply being free to act and represent sexuality will not, de facto, change the conditions of the social world which we inhabit. While I agree with this conclusion, I take issue with the premises which underlie it. Lesbian pornography *does* rely, sometimes quite heavily, on a liberatory politics; however, reducing the complexity of lesbian pornography to this simple formulation excises some of the most important actions which it undertakes.

Circulation

The two most prominent lesbian sex magazines of the 1980s were On Our Backs and Bad Attitude, the former out of San Francisco and the latter out of Boston, and both founded in 1984. Both were traditional format magazines, composed of short stories, photo spreads, non-fiction articles, advice columns, letters to the editor, and advertising.

Both relied heavily on submissions from readers, and neither was able to pay much to their contributors.[47] While the fundamental concept and content of the magazines was similar, it is important to note that On Our Backs was a higher budget production than Bad Attitude, featuring more photos, relying on fewer graphics, and publishing fewer stories, which are cheaper to print than photos. This is largely due to their ability to attract advertising, particularly from Absolut vodka (Findlay xi).[48] Whatever the material differences between the magazines however, they each positioned themselves in strikingly similar ways to both anti-porn feminism and their readers/consumers – they were similarly encoded. In their very titles, each magazine firmly places itself in opposition to Radical Feminism's anti-pornography stance. Bad Attitude explains that "this magazine is called Bad Attitude because that's what women who take their sexuality into their own hands (so to speak) are told they have." While the producers are certainly referring to the oppression which women face in society in general, there is no doubt that Radical Feminism features prominently in their reclaiming of their "attitude." On Our Backs is even more explicitly speaking back, naming itself in parodic reference to the feminist publication off our backs. On Our Backs goes a step further in its subtitle, however: "Entertainment for the Adventurous Lesbian" deliberately mimics Playboy's "Entertainment for Men." In fact, On Our Backs even borrows from Playboy's formula by including the "On Our Backs Interview" featuring such lesbian luminaries as Kathy Acker, Jane DeLynn, and Dorothy Allison. From the outset, these magazines name themselves as not only outside of, but actively and consciously antagonistic towards, Radical Feminist politics.

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[47] As Findlay notes "the magazine's standard payment for erotic stories in those days [1984] was $15" ("Preface" xiii).

[48] It is unclear why Bad Attitude did not attract Absolut advertising, since the company's strategy in the 1980s was to buy the back cover of all gay and lesbian publications.

Through their circulation, these magazines make available to readers both the idea of a sexualized community and an ever-expanding realm of sexual possibilities and pleasure. I use the term "circulation" to encompass two interrelated actions which the magazines undertake: what they show to their readers by the mere fact of their material existence (what I call "demonstration"), and the interactive conversations that they engender both between editors and readers and among readers themselves (what I call "conversation"). Here, I read demonstration as an act of "encoding," to return to Hall's terminology, and conversation as an act of "decoding" and even what I would term "re-encoding." I use the term "re-encoding" to mark my departure from Hall's terminology. Because Hall maintains a large gap between encoders and decoders, he calls this process reproduction. That is, the meanings that are taken by consumers are re-appropriated by the producers in order to capitalize on them and make their products more appealing (and therefore profitable). While this conceptualization is intended to move away from more linear approaches that are interested in what texts "do" to readers, his terminology nonetheless maintains a linearity in the reading process that cannot account for the more interactive relationship of encoders and decoders through marginalized texts. Importantly, in the context of lesbian pornography, the consumers are participants in the process, and the work of re-encoding takes place not strictly at the level of the product itself, but also at the level of the community in which it circulates. By bringing these components of the communication circuit together, I demonstrate how, for marginalized discourses, the interactivity of encoding and decoding is a central generator of meanings. The magazines actively demonstrate the existence of a sex-positive community, making it possible for women to enter it, either literally or imaginatively. At the same time, the magazines demonstrate a variety of sexual practices and pleasure which readers can (and often do) adopt as part of their own sex lives, thus reinforcing the feeling of belonging within the very community which the magazines represent.

By virtue of their publication and circulation, On Our Backs and Bad Attitude brought the lesbian pro-sex community to a number of much smaller and more isolated communities throughout the United States and around the world. In so doing, they enabled even the most isolated and lonely of lesbians to feel a part of something larger than themselves, a community of women that, while often located physically in a geographical "elsewhere" (almost always San Francisco), was nonetheless an imaginative reality for women in very different geographical and social realities. A typical example from the letters page reads: "What a revelation finding a copy of On Our Backs. I have been totally out of it, living in a small town" (On Our Backs 3.3, 5). Another: "Don't mind me. I'm just a lone dyke trapped in Beaumont, Texas.... Whenever your magazine arrives, I have my own little lesbian oasis in the middle of a het desert" (3.4, 3). Feeling isolated and detached from this imagined community, some letters even seek the advice of editors on how they might actually find it physically. For example, listen to this letter to the editor of Bad Attitude: "Worcester (AKA Wormtown) is light years behind the rest of the country in lesbian visibility, so any advice you could pass along as to where the leatherdykes hang out in your area would be much appreciated..."(Bad Attitude 8.1, 5).

This feeling of connection to a broader community even cuts across national borders, with letters from around the world voicing the conservatism of their various settings and their relief at feeling included in this other community which the magazines have given them access to. For instance, one woman from Bristol, England writes: "A small letter from across the waters to let you know that I am an avid reader of your magazine.... This is such a deprived community over here, however, this has been cured with your magazine" (On Our Backs 4.4, 3). One woman from Yugoslavia writes: "Since that time [a lesbian affair] I have lived on an island of silence, isolation, and emotional darkness.... Perhaps you can help me dear readers of On Our Backs, with letters and some other donations?" (7.5, 7) Or this, from a reader in Thailand:

> I don't suppose you've ever thought about it before, but the distribution of

> On Our Backs gets a go-around here in Thailand. There are some of us gals here who live in hard-to-get-to places and do not have the convenience of the around the corner women's bookstore. As a result, my copy gets mailed around Thailand to other horny women. (8.1, 5)

The magazines function as a vital link between these women and a broader community.

Perhaps the most isolated of all members of the lesbian community are prison inmates. One woman writes to On Our Backs that "the system I'm in is very repressive towards women, and especially lesbians, and our numbers here are few – so the need is great" (3.3, 5). For this woman, On Our Backs serves as an affirmation of her sexuality in an isolated and hostile environment. On Our Backs responded by encouraging readers to buy gift subscriptions for women in prison, thus expanding even further the community which it serves. The subscription drive not only shows that On Our Backs is well aware of how important it is to isolated and incarcerated women, but also calls on the community itself to help support these very women. A few years later, an inmate writes the following to the editors:

> Just a short letter from a woman in prison to let you know how much I appreciate your magazine.... Unfortunately, I still have a couple of more years to do before my parole. But On Our Backs keeps me informed on the outside world. I know what I left behind and I know what I have to look forward to. Keep up the excellent work – it's inspiring. (5.1, 5)

While for the first letter writer On Our Backs served as an affirmation, for this woman it serves as both a reminder and a promise: it is the link that keeps her connected to her community.

Women in heterosexual relationships, closeted women, and women who fall into both categories also benefit from the magazines' demonstration of community.

> I suppose I'm woefully behind the times, but it's dark in the closet. My husband would kill me if he knew of my love for lesbian B&D sex, and there are many other reasons for me not to come out.... The stories, the photo essay, and even the ads opened my eyes – among other things. (5.1, 5)

This letter writer, isolated due to both marriage and the closet, is able to see some affirmation of her fantasies and desires in print, thus connecting her to a community outside of herself. At the same time, however, she shows us the connection between a demonstration of community and a demonstration of practices and pleasures. Each component of the magazine (stories, photo essays, and advertisements) "opened her eyes" to a wider range of possibilities than the closet might have afforded her.

To my mind, one of the most important facts to remember when examining these magazines is that they were produced and circulated over and over again, several times a year, over a period of several years.[49] As such, they developed an interactive relationship with their readerships, publishing their readers' letters, photos and stories. These were not simply one-way cultural productions, put out into the world to be consumed by their readers, but were dynamic and interactive productions which depended both on their community putting out money, and just plain "putting out." While the magazines serve an important function of drawing more isolated women into a community, they also provide an interactive forum for community debate and dialogue. The interactive nature of these magazines is evident from their very first issues. Each magazine solicits its readers to contribute and subscribe to the magazine: they are a product of and for their community. A letter from the editors in Issue #1 of On Our Backs declaring 1984 the "Year of the Lustful Lesbian" specifically thanks "our contributors, production crew and advertisers, and all of the individuals and bookstores who have supported us through their orders." Furthering their self-presentation as the product of a community, the magazine presents a series of photos from their fundraising strip shows, showing how a huge community base of support was mobilized in order to fund the venture.[50] Finally, the

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[49] It is important to note that the publication of these magazines was not always

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"regular," that is, on time. In the early 1990s both magazines saw production outages which lasted for some time due to financial constraints. On Our Backs was revived by the publishers of *Girlfriends* in 1998, and continues to publish. Bad Attitude, unfortunately, has been defunct since the mid-1990s.

[50] While an analysis of the lesbian strip show is obviously beyond the scope of a project which deals specifically with print based materials, it is interesting to note that these strip shows became hugely popular in San Francisco during the 1980s. The initial

inaugural issue of On Our Backs included a lengthy readers' survey which succeeded not only in providing the publishers with the information that they needed to make the magazine as appealing (and, consequently, as successful) as possible, but also in making readers feel that they were an important part of this production.

While the magazines solicited feedback and contributions from their readers, thus initiating an on-going dialogue between editors and readers[51], the magazines also encouraged conversation among readers themselves. Readers would frequently respond to the letters of other readers, reiterating questions and concerns, or offering alternate opinions and/or readings. For some, it is simply a matter of sharing information and/or debunking myths, as for the writer who states: "This is in answer to D.M. Diamond and anyone else who wonders: Yes, Virginia, there are lesbian couples who still make love even after years together" (On Our Backs 4.4, 5). Other writers' responses to letters seek to validate and connect their feelings and/or practices to other lesbians. For example, one reader writes that "I have the same feelings as 'Nickie' in her letter to the Fall '87 issue.

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shows organized by On Our Backs were the start of the popular "BurLEZk" shows, a weekly lesbian strip show. "BurLEZk" became so popular that several shows were produced and released as videos.

[51] It wasn't until the fall issue of 1985 that On Our Backs began the formulaic practice of "responding" to readers' letters with editorial comment. Bad Attitude never adopted that practice.

Would you do something special on sex during the menstrual cycle?" (4.4, 3). In this particular exchange, the readers publicly share an interest in a particular sexual practice, thus validating that practice not only for themselves but also for other readers. The letter writers themselves as well as the readers who share this interest are imaginatively connected to one another through the interactivity of the magazines.

Interaction is not, however, limited to validation and connection. It is often the forum for conflict and disagreement. For example, the following letter responds passionately to the views of another reader: "I'd like to respond to the letter from Susan M. of Tulsa Oklahoma that appeared in the Jan.-Feb. '89 issue of On Our Backs.... As a bisexual woman, I can tell you I'm no 'weasel humper' .... I'm not a tourist in the dyke world" (5.6, 5). By addressing the vexed issue of the role that bisexual women play in the lesbian community, this writer will not allow for the homogenization of that community, claiming a place for herself and other bisexual women in the "dyke world." While this response may serve as validation and connection to other bisexual readers, it also serves as a challenge to the very constitution of the community for many lesbians. In giving voice to conflicting perspectives, the magazines serve to at least challenge their readership to think about specific issues, and at best, help them to change or modify their views.

The magazines also achieve more than simply initiating a dialogue between their own covers. They also initiate conversations among their readers which never find their way into the pages, although reports of them do. One woman writes: "My mate and I have been doing some talking after reading your magazine on subjects of mutual interest never before brought up" (2.1, 3). Here we have evidence of the way that On Our Backs generates conversations between lovers, creating the possibility of communication and even action which had to that point remained silent. The magazine allows these readers to share their "mutual interest" in things which they have until now remained silent about. While this letter draws our attention to the conversations which are introduced into intimate partnerships, the magazines also engender conversations among friends and community members. For example, one woman writes:

> Anyway, your magazine has supported my feelings and recent discoveries that sex is okay. I know my fantasies are okay and I'm forcing myself to talk about sex with my friends and partners. Doing this always turns out feeling good. Also, your magazine gives me other hints, which is great. (On Our Backs 1.3, 5)

This letter writer not only gains validation for both her sexual and fantasy life from the magazine, but it also prompts her to act, to initiate conversations about sex with both partners and friends. By initiating these conversations, she is actively changing the community which she belongs to, and although this may be a difficult undertaking (she must "force" herself to do it), it is nonetheless worthwhile.

On Our Backs generates conversations in the community through other means than simply its publication, however. The magazine also mounts community events, like video screenings, readings, lectures, demonstrations, workshops, strip shows, and fundraisers which have similar effects. One letter writer reports to the editors that:

> Like every other woman in the audience of the Boston premiere of *Clips* [a lesbian produced and performed pornographic film], I left the hall with nothing but the image of that open pussy and gushing G-spot. My friend and I then sauntered over to Harvard Square and for the first time talked about the specifics of some of our sexual likes and dislikes, and the adventurous things we had tried with lovers in the past. (5.3, 5)

Here, the magazine and the film screening that it has sponsored prompt yet another woman to have an explicit conversation about her sexual life.

We can see that the conversations initiated by the magazines change both readers' ideas and their actions. Readers recognize this, and even introduce topics in the hopes of beginning a communal conversation on topics that they feel are important to the community. One woman demonstrates both her savvy at the role of On Our Backs and her desire to initiate a new conversation on lesbians and HIV in the following letter:

> Obviously what is needed is much more honest communication and dialogue, which I feel this article contributed to. But what I would really like is to hear from other readers on this subject. What are you doing out there? Everyone talks safe sex, but is everyone practising it? Let's get a

> dialogue going here in our own public forum. (8.1, 5)

This writer calls on other readers to begin a conversation about their safe sex practices, hoping to learn about lesbians and HIV not only from the magazine itself, but also from other readers. She shows us how conversations in the magazines are intimately linked with education.

Education

Liberation and circulation come together in the magazines in the form of education, one of the key features of the magazines which is too often left un- or under-analysed. While I have argued that liberation and circulation change both the conceptual and the practical ground which lesbian occupy, deliberate and concerted education is a significant way that magazines actively change the ideas and practices of their readers. One memorable letter reads: "I never thought I'd see the day when I learned how to fistfuck from a magazine article, but I have to hand it to you this time" (3.4, 3). In this particular letter, we have an unambiguous testament to the magazine's educational thrust; even the writer is surprised by its effectiveness. For this reader (and presumably for at least one other woman), On Our Backs opened up not only an imaginative possibility, but a practical reality.[52]

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[52] In fact, Suzie Bright once hosted a "hands on" fist-fucking demonstration, an event that I will return to later in this chapter.

It is not simple coincidence that lesbians learn about new sexual practices through their interaction with lesbian pornography. Just as isolated lesbians seek out those texts that can connect them to a broader community, sexually curious lesbians seek out texts which offer them new possibilities; they are also well aware of the fact that they are learning. For example, take this letter:

> I'm so glad your magazine exists! When I heard about it and read it for the first time, I thought of *On Our Backs* primarily as an erotic publication. Now I realize it also serves an important purpose as an educational publication. There are some great columns and articles that provide clear straightforward information on sexual issues important to lesbians. I have not yet seen this information available anywhere else (2.5, 3).

This reader realizes that, while her initial attraction to the magazine was a fairly straightforward desire to be turned on, she in fact gets even more from the magazine. She recognizes it as an educational tool and uses it for that purpose. This letter disproves two politically opposed yet similarly simplistic assumptions about lesbian pornography: it neither dupes its readers into passively accepting a particular ideology about sex and sexuality, nor does it serve only as an innocuous "turn-on," devoid of consequences or effects. This letter demonstrates that readers of lesbian pornography are often savvy and self-reflexive, aware not only of what the porn is showing them, but also of the uses to which they themselves are putting it.

While lesbians quite obviously made use of the magazines as a whole as learning objects, the most apparent and sustained efforts at education undoubtedly took place in the magazines' advice columns. Here, readers wrote in to the magazines on any number of sex related topics and got frank and direct answers to their questions. But the lesbian versions of "Dear Abby" pulled no punches. For example, the following letter from the "Girl Talk" column in Bad Attitude: "My girlfriend has been eager to shave me but I'm petrified. She wants to use a straight edge razor. Should I experience this, and how do you maintain a shaved pussy?" (*BA* 7.5, 4*).* The magazine replies with a no-nonsense guide to shaving, including advising the letter writer to "place a hot towel over the area for a minute or two to soften the hairs. Use a shaving cream, I recommend Edge.... Make sure the blade is new. Take your time and go gently" (4). It then goes on to advise the writer about how to maintain herself, and how she will likely feel afterwards.[53]

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[53] This kind of exchange, where a reader admits to being "terrified" and the editors attempt to both assuage her fears and to arm her with necessary knowledge stands in stark contrast to some of the criticisms lobbed at lesbian pornography by those who actually purport to read and engage with it in order to arrive at their analysis. Sara Dunn, for example, laments lesbian pornography's investment in its "bad girl" status, and Julia Creet likewise theorizes that the appeal of lesbian pornography is in its outlaw position *vis-a-vis* the symbolic mother of feminism. An admission of terror seems to me about as far removed as one can get from the implied arrogance and coolness of outsider chic.

The Not-So-Harsh Schoolmistress: Susie Bright

While the interactive educational nature of the magazines is aptly demonstrated in these communications from readers, it is in the persona of Susie Sexpert where we find the most concrete and consistent manifestation of the pedagogical value of lesbian pornography.[54] Susie Bright's Susie Sexpert's Lesbian Sex World, a collection of Bright's popular "Toys for Us" columns from On Our Backs, was published in 1990 and features essays originally published from 1984 to 1990. In it, Bright runs the gamut of lesbian sexual practices, from fantasizing to fisting, determined to educate her readers about the infinite possibilities of lesbian sex.

> The satisfaction of introducing women to the words that describe our sexual lives, to the pictures of our bodies and desires, to the confidence of hearing other women's common and kinky sexual experiences – well, there's been no turning back. Sexually, there is nothing new under the

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[54] I will limit my analysis of Susie Bright to Susie Sexpert's Lesbian Sex World because it is composed of excepts from On Our Backs and as a result is an excellent example of the teacherly thrust of the magazines. As a founding editor of On Our Backs, Bright's impact on lesbian pornography is intimately bound to the magazine's impact, and her solo work (at least during the time period under examination in this project), I would argue, serves as a supplement to the cultural work of the magazine. It is important to note, however, that Bright has published several other books, has edited numerous "erotic" and porn anthologies, and lectures and demonstrates widely on lesbian sex.

> sun. But there are still so many shadows, and it has been the talking and writing and revealing that have cast us into the light.(15-16)

Here we can see that Bright recognizes the importance, and employs the strategies, of liberation, demonstration and conversation in the service of her ultimate goal of education. Women are "cast in to the light" of liberation, the "pictures of our bodies and desires" are demonstrated for them, and they hear a conversation about "other women's common and kinky sexual experiences."

Bright's "Toys for Us" column in On Our Backs began as a one shot deal in the magazine's premiere issue. It changed its character over time, moving from being a "lesbian Consumer Reports of sex toys" (16) to a lesbian "Dear Abby." Eventually, Bright abandoned all pretense of responding to readers' letters (she was "too impatient to wait for yesterday's postmarked questions"), and instead became more "interested in the ins and outs of intimate lesbian life" than she was in "erotic popular mechanics" (16). Yet, through these various incarnations, Bright's fundamental goal remained the same: to educate her readers on the politics and practices of lesbian sex.

Bright moves from dildos to the G-spot, from anal sex to group sex, from vibrators to S/M, all in the name of giving lesbians more to think about their sexuality and sexual practices. She recognizes the need for information and education, and is only too happy to oblige. "We stumble and fumble and watch dirty movies for tips, but there's a lot to lesbian sex that doesn't get talked about. I recently had the pleasure of hosting a hands-on lesbian fist fucking workshop in Seattle, during the 1987 Living in Leather conference" (79). Here, Bright points out both a lack of knowledge and a lack of conversation. The workshop itself, as well as her narrative of it, addresses each of those absences; it begins with a conversation about fisting among the workshop participants, and culminates in a fisting demonstration. Bright not only puts out on the page, she puts out on the stage.

Bright begins this workshop by asking how many of the participants had read her earlier piece in On Our Backs about fisting and is amazed when every woman there raises her hand. This earlier article is a concerted effort on Bright's part to educate her readers about yet another sexual practice.

> One of the great misunderstood characters of the world is the lesbian fist fucker. Her sexual technique of inserting her whole hand in her lover's cunt is considered physically impossible by some, and bizarre to others. To those uninitiated to the pleasures of handballing, I invite you to study this column thoroughly. Don't be ashamed of your sexual illiteracy, just remedy it. For those of you who are veteran pussy handlers, grab your lube, because we're about to go public. (65)

This introductory paragraph nicely summarizes the main purposes of the article: on the one hand, it will clear up "misunderstandings," and remedy "sexual illiteracy"; on the other hand, it will serve as a "coming out" party for the "veteran pussy handlers."[55]

Bright's first column was dedicated to perhaps the most provocative of all lesbian sex paraphernalia: the dildo. A veteran employee of San Francisco's woman-owned sex shop Good Vibrations, Bright sought to bring to the readers of On Our Backs the same straightforward information that she had been bringing to her retail customers for years. "Ladies, the discreet, complete and definitive information on dildos is this: penetration is only as heterosexual as kissing. Now that truth can be known! Fucking knows no gender" (19). In this deceptively simple statement, Bright demonstrates a vital critical approach to sex. While a society (or in this case, even a subculture) may imbue particular sexual practices with particular meanings, it is important to recall that those meanings do not necessarily inhere in the practices themselves. And, with this knowledge, it is possible to attach altogether different meanings to any number of sexual acts. Bright's mantra is not simply one of liberation, demystifying and throwing off the repression that has surrounded this particular sexual practice; it makes available a different way of seeing that allows readers to recognize not only the meanings that they make, but also the meanings that they might *un* or *re*make by reinvesting new meanings into sexual practices.

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[55] I will return to the influence of the "private" and the "public" on sexual practices when I discuss the work of Pat Califia in Chapter 4.

Toward an *ars erotica*

While this analysis of "Susie Sexpert" shows a complex politics in Bright's particular brand of education, it is nonetheless true that a significant component of her work involves the straightforward transmission of information and advice on particular sexual practices. As such, she still imperfectly participates in Foucault's category of the *scientia sexualis*, all the while pointing her readers toward *ars erotica*. As I've outlined in my introduction, Foucault identifies "two great procedures for producing the truth of sex" (The History of Sexuality 57), the *ars erotica* and the *scientia sexualis*. The *scientia sexualis* classifies and orders sexual practices and desires as "an ordered system of knowledge" (69). *Ars erotica*, on the other hand, seeks truth through pleasure itself, without recourse to any external authority or law. Pleasure is "understood as a practice and accumulated as experience" (57). Moreover, the knowledge which results "must be deflected back into the sexual practice itself, in order to shape it as though from within and amplify its effects" (57). According to Foucault the *scientia sexualis* relies on the confession to produce the truth of sex, while *ars erotica* relies on the transmission of a secret. We can see each of these procedures at work in Bright. On the one hand she enumerates a series of sexual practices and provides something of an "ordered system of knowledge." On the other hand, her pursuit of the truth of sex is sought "through pleasure itself, without recourse to any external authority or law." Her columns could be read as confessions (there is, after all, much attention to her own sexual practices), but there is no implied authorial listener waiting to grant forgiveness or absolution. The confession is not for Bright's own benefit, as Foucault argues it must be under the *scientia sexualis*, but for the benefit of her reader. On the other hand, her columns serve to pass along the secrets of pleasure to her readers, and her knowledge is "deflected back into the sexual practice itself."

While the case of Susie Bright is ambivalent, the case for lesbian pornography in general constituting an *ars erotica* is more persuasive. While Foucault's *ars erotica* requires the master, working alone, who initiates his [sic] subjects, I would argue that lesbian pornography serves as a communal master, reinvesting pleasure and producing a cumulative effect on its users. Bright may largely produce a "how to" of lesbian sex, but the entirety of lesbian pornography serves as a window to a sexual culture. The following letter, while lengthy, shows the important ways that the discourse of the *scientia sexualis* is still very much embedded in the initiate's relationship to sex. The response from the editors, however, tries to steer the writer away from those discourses and toward the secret of the *ars erotica*.

> I'm from the southeast, and a small rural area where people would just as soon shoot queers as to get to know them. Needless to say, I'm closeted at most times except around a few very close friends.... Please feel flattered because I refuse to write letters, but I am inspired by your magazine. I have many questions, many that are quite naive and you would consider

> silly, but I would like a response. My homosexual world is much too conservative and small to allow me the same experiences you have lived – so here goes:
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> 1) Was the Bulldagger of the Season a real center-fold for perusal – excitement– or as a satire on heterosexual centerfolds...
>
> 2) In the story "*Phantom Knights*" a woman becomes involved with two other women – or was one of them a man? ... Do some people find enjoyment in having their dildos sucked? Do some dildos come?
>
> 3) What exactly is a leather store and what do you do with the articles? – the chains? – what are s/m techniques? Does this all fit together – leather, chains, s/m techniques? Do people really use "Hankies"? What is a shit scene, victorian scene, piercer, bondage? ... I find your magazine fun, interesting, sexually exciting and educational. (On Our Backs 1.2, 3-5)

We can see from this letter that the writer frames her questions firmly in the terms of the *scientia sexualis*. She wants to attach genders to models; she wants to know about specific S/M paraphernalia; she wants definitions of particular types of scenes. Above all, she confesses her naivete to the experts and seeks to remedy her ignorance.

The editors do their best to answer this woman's questions:

> Bulldagger of the Season was made to tickle your funnybone as well as your clit.... Yes, some lesbians love a good dildo blow job.... For a more

> thorough answer to your questions, we recommend reading COMING TO POWER, an anthology of lesbian s/m essays and erotica (Alyson Press, Boston, MA). (1.2, 5)

Trying to respect the format in which the questions were asked, the editors attempt to answer her question in the order in which they are placed. But what we find in this response is that many of the questions themselves do not permit an adequate answer. While the editors can answer in the affirmative that some lesbians like to have their dildos sucked, the other questions are not nearly as straightforward as our writer might imagine. In answer to the first question, for example, there is a complexity to the role of the centerfold: it is all of the things which the letter writer has asked about and more. The editors recognize that the answers which this woman seeks are not necessarily the answers which this woman needs. They satisfy her by providing her both with what she wants and with what they know she needs: she gets some clear and direct answers; she gets some answers which further complicate her own questions; and ultimately, she gets referred to other sources of knowledge (Coming to Power) where other components of the secret may be revealed. They do not provide her with an "ordered knowledge" of sex, but rather point her on a road to discovery. They show her the path to the secret. In responding to this letter, the editors make available to this woman an initiation not from a master, but from an entire community.

From Theory to Practice

As I have shown, the magazines serve the important function of connecting women to a broader community and a broader range of sexual possibilities. As my epigraph to this chapter suggests, "Above all, On Our Backs straddles a wide field of What Lesbians Should Be Able To Know" (5.4, 5). But, in addition to the imaginative space that the magazines afford to their readers, they also have a concrete effect on "what lesbians should be able to do." Creating possibilities also creates practices. Susie Bright makes this explicit when she states: "I brought them [books and toys] not because I thought they would be so new, but because I wanted to demonstrate how making the first change in sexual behaviour is the hardest. The next changes come much more sweetly" (Bright, 135). We can see from the letters that the magazines have often inspired this "first change" in their readers, as well as many of the sweeter ones that follow. One letter writer, for example, writes: "In the meantime, I will spend some of my precious energies developing my own fantasies. You've opened up a whole new world for me..." (3.2, 3). The changes that the magazines generate in readers run a spectrum, from the imaginative possibilities sparked in that writer, to the practical changes sparked in another "From the minute I first laid eyes on your mag, I haven't been able to settle back into my old, tame ways!" (5.1, 5)

The letters also show a sophisticated understanding of the ways that the magazines work as both print and serial productions to change their readers' own actions.

For example, the following: "As a burgeoning lesbian whose only resource that nurtures my sexuality has been the print media, I can tell you that I've read it all and NOTHING has brought me as far as fast as On Our Backs. Nothing kicks me in the ass like *On Our Backs*" (10.3, 5). In this letter, we see the role that the print media plays for this reader as the "only resource that nurtures [her] sexuality," and we see the importance of its serial production in the remark that "nothing has brought me as far as fast as On Our Backs." Ultimately though, we can vividly see how the magazine serves as an active force in this woman's life, "kicking her in the ass" in a way that other texts simply don't. And, if there is any lingering doubt that lesbians sometimes actually change their sexual actions as a result of reading the magazines, consider the following:

> I often have commentary on the contents of On Our Backs, but it usually doesn't get beyond coffee circle conversations at my local dyke café. I decided to write this time because 'With or Without You' by Pat Califia (Nov/Dec) [an article about masturbating during sex] actually changed my actions. (8.3, 5)

Here, our reader acknowledges that while she is often moved to conversation by the magazine (a conversation which may or may not *indirectly* change her actions, as I've discussed above), "this time" she wants to share with the editors (and presumably other readers) that a particular article *directly* changed a particular sexual behaviour.

What I have demonstrated through my analysis of the magazines is that the magazines function on a number of interrelated and progressive levels with their readers. They begin with a discourse of liberation, granting their readers permission to value and explore their desires and practices without pre-judging them. Then, through their circulation, they demonstrate for their readers how this new range of desires and practices exists and circulates within a particular community of lesbians, thus inviting them to participate in something broader than themselves. In this way, they encourage a conversation among readers and producers, once again widening the field of possible practices and desires to which lesbians have access. And finally, they explicitly educate their readers, telling them how they might engage in certain practices and laying out safe ways of engaging in different acts, not only making available the idea of alternative sexual desires and practices, but actually giving readers the tools and knowledge to engage in them. While readers may or may not partake of any of these aspects of the magazine, the letters demonstrate that a great many of the readers do just that.

What each of these possibilities shares with the others is that they change the readers in some way: they change the readers' ideas or they change the readers' practices. In the end, it is through this change that the magazines actively produce community. While this assertion may be anathema to most liberal pro-sex arguments which contend that pornography *doesn't* change the way people think or act, this is one of the most vital and under-analysed effects of pornography. The problem, it seems to me, is assuming *in advance* that we know what those changes might be, or assuming that those changes will be constant across a varied and contested genre. To argue that the production and/or consumption of pornography has no concrete effects may be an easy short-cut when faced with the kind of unsophisticated broadside attacks to which pornography is often subjected, but it does little to broaden our understanding when the front line which we line up behind is really a lie, however pragmatically well-intentioned that lie may be.

Chapter 2

Good Girls Don't: Kiss & Tell

Where are the lesbian feminists?

Lesbian feminists like to fuck hard.

Drawing the Line

As I have argued in Chapter One, one of the most productive critical ways of reading lesbian pornography is to place it firmly within the circuit of communication, and to recognize that the encoding and the decoding of texts, along with the complex and interactive relationship between those two processes, allows for a more nuanced appreciation of what these cultural productions actually *do* in and to the lesbian community. They serve at once as vehicles for a sex-positive lesbianism that seeks to redress the contradictory de-eroticization and over-sexualization and vilification of (certain) lesbians within anti-porn activism, while at the same time they effectively function as an *ars erotica*, producing and generating new knowledges and new communities among their consumers. On Our Backs and Bad Attitude demonstrate the efficacy of widely available lesbian pornographic productions in expanding both their readers' minds and their sexual practices. In so doing, they serve a pivotal role in building a sex-positive and sex-radical community. While these magazines certainly embody a political position and challenge the politics of a significant portion of the lesbian community, they nonetheless rarely take politics as their object. Their political implications lie primarily in the mere fact of their production and circulation: they reach a great number of women with a great number of erotic possibilities, and, as I have argued, it is in their capacity to expand the realm of possibility for their readers that they accomplish their most productive cultural work.

In this chapter, I both build and expand on that argument through an analysis of the Canadian performance/art collective Kiss & Tell. I argue that their photo installation and resulting postcard book, Drawing the Line, are most productively read for their interactivity, that is, the way that they make explicit the communication circuit that renders them discursively meaningful. Through these unique media, the work of decoding on the part of consumers is made apparent, not simply to the critical reader of the texts, but to all of its readers. While the interaction of encoders and decoders provides a similar framework to my analysis of the magazines, the key difference in examining Drawing the Line is that, in contrast to the magazines, it takes politics as its object, engaging and complicating the debates of the Sex Wars through its focus on both representational and sexual politics.[56] In their next project, the monograph Her Tongue on My Theory, Kiss & Tell affirm their commitment to examining sexual and representational politics, but in this instance the arena of engagement becomes much larger. Driven by a pressing need to address state supported offensives against lesbian (and gay) cultural productions, Her Tongue on My Theory expands Kiss & Tell's focus from the politics that play themselves out within the lesbian community to the politics that play themselves out within the nation. The connection between Drawing the Line and Her Tongue on My Theory is transacted around the assertion that pornography serves as a flashpoint connecting two arenas of representation: the discursive and the political.

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[56] By virtue of their status as an "art" collective, and the fact that Drawing the Line was primarily mounted in larger urban centres, it is important to point out that Kiss & Tell's audience is contiguous with, but not identical to, the audience of On Our Backs and

Photographer and multi-media artist Susan Stewart, interdisciplinary artist and performer Lizard Jones, and writer, performance and media artist Persimmon Blackbridge make up Kiss & Tell, a Vancouver-based lesbian art collective whose work usefully engages with and contributes to debates about lesbian sexual representation and regulation. Their photographic installation, Drawing the Line, mounted in several locations during the early 1990s and published in book form in 1991, is designed as a commentary on and contribution to feminist and lesbian debates over sexually explicit lesbian representation. Their theoretical/erotic book, Her Tongue on My Theory, published in 1994, while continuing this work, also focusses more directly on state interventions and the place of the nation in lesbian sexual representations. In engaging

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Bad Attitude.

with and exposing some of the fundamental assumptions and strategies at work in both state surveillance and citizen building, for example the normalizing imperative that undergirds both structures, Kiss & Tell create the possibility of other modes of expression and action which do not simply redeploy these structures of knowing. In questioning the terms of the Sex Wars and redeploying its assumptions and iconography in contradictory ways, Drawing the Line at once demands that its viewers self-consciously place themselves within these debates, and, at the same time, produces other imaginative and active possibilities for lesbian sexuality and sexually explicit representation. By incorporating a pornographic narrative into its critique of state apparatuses, Her Tongue on My Theory undermines the concepts "citizenship" and "nation," creatively articulating the possibility of a queerness which lives (and lusts) elsewhere.

Kiss and Tell began working on Drawing the Line in 1988. By 1994, the exhibition had been mounted 16 times in 15 different cities, as well as having been published as a postcard book. As an installation, it is composed of 100 photographs, ranging from "soft" to "hard-core," all featuring the same two models. Kiss & Tell explain that they used the same two models in all of the photos so that the judgements viewers passed would be based on the sexual representations, and not a preference for different "types" of women: "By using the same two women in all the pictures we attempted to limit the judgement to being about what the models were doing and how it was depicted" (unpaginated). Female viewers are invited to enter into debates about pornography and lesbian sexuality by writing on the gallery walls, be that by literally "drawing the line" between acceptable and unacceptable images, or by offering their reactions, interpretations and critiques; men were invited to write their comments in a book placed in the centre of the room. One of the central goals of mounting the show in this way was to promote interaction. As Kiss & Tell state in the introduction to the postcard book, "Interaction happens on many levels: between the models, between the photographer and the models, between the viewers and the photographs, between the viewers and other viewers' comments." The postcard book consists of 40 photographs culled from the show. On the back of each are selected comments and dialogues from various cities where the original installation was mounted. Again, Kiss & Tell selected the format of the postcard book to promote interactivity. "We chose the postcard format as the best way to extend the interactivity of the show. You can put them on your walls or send them to your friends. You can change the order according to your preference. You can tear up the ones you Hate" (unpaginated). The result is an interactive debate, porn show, and communal space where interpretation, lust and politics share explicitly what they generally share only implicitly.

This interaction has been the focus of what little critical scholarly work has been done on Kiss & Tell to date. B.J. Wray argues that "Drawing the Line, in its spatial configuration of photographs, asks viewers to confront our often unacknowledged complicity with dominant, and highly exclusive, registers of acceptability" (30). She concludes that the

> exhibition, in its very structure, encourages viewers to reflect upon their own investments in normality and the extent to which these investments encroach upon *all* sexual representations. At the same time, the photographs themselves are shown to be embedded within the narratives lurking on the white walls. (30)

Wray uses the term "normality" to refer to a matrix of specifically ***heterosexual*** and mainstream acceptability. While I concur with her analysis that the show challenges its viewers to recognize the way in which they might constitute themselves in relation to "normality," I will argue that the "normality" in question, far from being heterosexual, is in fact both feminist and lesbian. Drawing the Line challenges its viewers to recognize the ways in which their interpretive positions have been constituted by the Sex Wars.

As I have argued in both the Introduction and the previous chapter, the Sex Wars marked a particularly heated and often vitriolic debate within feminist and lesbian communities on the politics of sexual practices and sexually explicit representation. In previous chapters, I identified an anti-porn position with Radical Feminism. At its most unrefined, Radical Feminism decries pornography as "the undiluted essence of anti-female propaganda"; as Susan Brownmiller puts it:

> there can be no 'equality' in porn, no female equivalent, no turning of the tables in the name of bawdy fun. Pornography, like rape, is a male invention, designed to dehumanize women, to reduce the female to an object of sexual access, not to free sensuality from moralistic or paternal inhibition. (Brownmiller 32)

This strand of Radical Feminism, particularly its conception of gender identity, harm, and the social, certainly underwrites anti-porn politics. However, in this chapter I wish to complicate and expand the feminist constituency behind anti-porn politics. Not all Radical Feminists were necessarily anti-porn activists, but neither would every anti-porn feminist necessarily identify as a Radical Feminist. Indeed, as I will go on to show, pro-erotica liberal feminists made their bed with anti-porn Radical Feminists (if you will permit the metaphor). And when arguments about pornography turn to the intervention of the state, which I consider in the last half of this chapter, the category "feminist" shows a notable muddying of Radical and liberal proponents and positions. The flippant way to tag this position is to refer to these feminists as "good girls," who stand over and against Sex Radicals, the "bad girls" who insisted that sexuality was not simply a tool of the patriarchy, that women are not only sexual victims but sexual agents as well.[57] In the remainder of this chapter, I use the term anti-porn feminism to denote precisely this muddying of political positions, where Radical Feminist analyses of pornography, sexuality and oppression mingle, sometimes rather incongruously, with liberal feminist recuperations of erotica, sensuality, and love.[58] The result is a position that holds on to the Radical Feminist doctrine in one arena, pornography, while maintaining that an alternative arena, erotica, is not identically structured.

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[57] As I detail in the previous chapters, some of the loudest and most influential of these voices came from the lesbian S/M community.

One of the most contentious and complicated features of the Radical Feminist anti-pornography position is the conflation of reality and representation. Having been well trained by feminism to recognize the ways that sex has been used as a tool of violence against women, the 1970s and 80s marked a dangerous slide in feminist theorizing from representation to reality, summed up nicely by Robin Morgan's by now axiomatic statement that "pornography is the theory, and rape the practice"(139). Under this rubric, pornography ceases to be representation in any form; it becomes reality, a real form of violence against women.

These conflations, however, of representation with reality, and sex and sexuality with inequality and domination, left feminism in a rather precarious political position. Anti-porn positions were opened up to charges of moralism and sex negativity. In order to counter these accusations, many feminists, particularly liberal feminists who shared an anti-porn position with Radical Feminism, attempted to further complicate feminist thinking by drawing a distinction between pornography and erotica. It is not sexual explicitness which this strand of feminism opposes, it is sexual objectification, and the (potential) abuse that women suffer in the making and using of pornography. In a particularly influential piece first published in Ms. Magazine and then republished in Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography, Gloria Steinem writes: "Look at any photo or film of people making love; really making love. The images may be diverse, but there is usually a sensuality and touch and warmth, an acceptance of bodies and nerve endings" (37). Liberal feminists celebrate an erotica that honours equality, sensuality, and love.

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[58] In fact, I would argue that it is this liberalization of Radical Feminist rhetoric that makes the anti-porn position more palatable to the liberal state.

However, this overt celebration of equality and pleasure covertly relies on a number of conservative and moralistic attitudes toward sex; moreover, it collapses/dissolves/blurs the distinction between liberal and Radical feminism. The formulation of "feminist" images put forth in Steinem's comment neatly places sexual explicitness back into Radical Feminism's own framework of representations equalling reality. Terms like "making love" and "sensuality" recuperate sex into a framework not of physical pleasure but of emotional attachment. Sex cannot be valued for its own sake. This position flattens and ignores the complexities of representation: erotica must portray "real" sex between "real" lovers. In opposition to the "real" violence and inequality of pornography, "acceptable" sexual image must still be "real" – that is, involve "real" love, "real" sex, and "real" passion (not coincidentally, all of the trappings that are able to render heterosexuality "acceptable" as well). This results in a double agenda: erotica must not only portray certain sexual activities (ones which convey equality and emotional attachment) but it must also do so only through the guise of reality. This has further implications, however, because the guise of reality affords erotica the protection of the "natural." Acceptable sex (and representations thereof) must convey the "natural" and "real" expression of genuine emotional attachment.[59]

Such values are highlighted in the early photos in Drawing the Line. The show begins with a series of "soft" images: the models share the same state of undress, fully or partially clothed, or completely nude; their clothing is everyday, signifying "natural" as opposed to "role-playing"; the settings are either domestic and hence private (a bedroom, a bathtub), or natural (leaves and a waterfall); the models almost exclusively have their eyes closed. Taken together, the early images stage some of the key tenets of feminist debates about sexuality: equality in part depends on the same degree of undress; everyday clothing speaks to both "naturalness" and "realness"; domestic settings convey reality, as well as privacy (thus safety); natural settings obviously portray the natural.

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[59] Of course, it is precisely the "naturalizing" of inequality through appeals to gender that MacKinnon and other Radical Feminists take to task. Here we can see the incongruity of grafting together liberal and Radical Feminist anti-porn positions: challenging naturalness in one domain does not translate directly into a critique of it in another.

Viewers' reactions suggest a natural consonance between feminist conceptions of erotica and the audience's own preferences."This is about love and I love it!" "Foolishly, wonderfully passionate. Yes!" "This touches me most intensely because it looks like my experience of real live lesbian sex. It is also the hardest to look at" (unpaginated). Just as feminist recuperations of erotica conflate naturalism and realness, equality and love, so too do some viewers. Naturalism and equality translate into "love," "passion," and the "real." However, if we read these comments critically, if we interrogate the apparently "natural" consonance at work here, we can see how reactions to sexually explicit representation have been structured by the tropes of feminist erotica: anti-porn, pro-erotica feminism actually teaches viewers to interpret images in particular ways. For the logic of feminist erotica, far from being a simple valorization of "real" and "equal" sex, also requires a representational and/or interpretive strategy. In images, as in language, sexual acts *are* represented, no matter how "real" (or unreal) they may be.

While the interpretive framework which feminism affords to women involves a more dominant, and certainly more coherent, positioning of viewers, it does not necessarily exert an uncontested influence. The debates of the Sex Wars provide an alternate structure for understanding these images which is also at work, and Drawing the Line renders these debates explicit. A conventional feminist understanding of "good" sex might take its representational / interpretive strategy for granted, but Drawing the Line will not permit its viewers to make such a slide. (I find it compelling that having one's eyes closed is one of the representational strategies that signifies feminist erotica. Perhaps opening one's eyes to sex is a challenge too dangerous for this way of (not) seeing.) Not only are viewers explicitly told that the models, Persimmon Blackbridge and Lizard Jones, are not "real life lovers," but they are constantly reminded of the competing interpretations which line the gallery walls. Of course, this strategy is not without its problems, as is made evident in the contrasting responses to a single image. The image is of "the lesbian missionary position." In it, one woman is performing oral sex on the other while playing with her nipple. Both women are completely nude, and while the photo appears to have been shot on a rug on the floor, the "passive" partner is comfortably reclined on a cushion, her eyes closed and a calm and blissful look on her face. The "active" model's long hair "tastefully" blocks any glimpse of the other model's genitals. While one viewer called this image the closest to her "experience of real live lesbian sex," another commentator (in the same city and during the same exhibition) writes, "like most lesbian sex in art, this has too much politics and not enough sex." Just as feminism affords a framework to interpret these images as "positive," sex radicalism affords a structure to reject them as "mere" politics.[60]

At the opposite end of the political spectrum from the soft-core images (and structurally at the opposite end of the show) are a series of photos which deliberately "cross the line" to the "bad girl" side of the Sex Wars. Most involve the use of S/M props and conventions, and one particularly controversial photo features a male voyeur. While feminist understandings of erotica allow for positive readings of the early photos, they also provides a structure for dismissing these latter images. In the photo featuring a male voyeur, for example, one woman writes, "Surely real lesbians wouldn't allow a man in the room to watch. I question the validity of this as an example of lesbian love." The valorization of "realness" works at a number of levels in this comment. This commentator expects and values not only "real" lesbians, but also "real" representations of a presumed "real" lesbian love.

Another series of photos on the "bad girl" side of the line features bondage (a collar and leash, handcuffs) and flagellation (a series of different whips), prompting one woman to respond, "create our own culture! Feathers and hide!" The comment is a dense one, invoking sexual play (feathers), S/M (leather) and the creation of an alternative culture, a culture which may very well stay underground if we read "hide" as a verb. This comment illustrates one of the important arguments of the "bad girls": we must replace the existing feminist tropes with a "new culture": sensuality becomes play and the penchant for realness is replaced by the acting out of an S/M scene.

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[60] This dismissal, however, does not itself go unchallenged. Well aware of the tropes that structure S/M imagery, one viewer comments "I'm not *vanilla* just cuz I don't do what you do. If S/Mers want respect, they should try giving some to others."

Simply replacing old tropes with new ones, however, doesn't disrupt the fact that replacing an old set of interpretive practices with a new one simply re-enforces a simplistic "inside" vs. "outside" conception of belonging. To rephrase my critique, anti-porn feminist arguments constitute a closed system whereby what one *is*, in this case a feminist, determines what one *does*, i.e. the sexual acts one participates in. All too often, however, the "bad girls" rely on the same logical structure. Once again, the issue of what one *is*, in this case, an S/M dyke, determines what one *does*. S/M lesbians recognize their own iconography and defend the boundaries of their subjectivity in much the same way as feminism has allowed a "drawing of the line" between the inside and the outside of acceptable images. If, as I've already mentioned, one viewer could dismiss a photo because it represented "too much politics," thus marking the outside of S/M, another sequence of comments outlines at least one portion of the inside: "The best photos in the show are in bathrooms and back alleys. *Does this surprise you?"*

At both the "good girl" and "bad girl" ends of the spectrum, then, there is a pre-existing interpretive framework for images, a framework which allows the viewers to predictably embrace or dismiss images as exciting, abusive, or boring. Between these two poles, however, as the images move from "softer" to "harder," the images begin to play with the conventions which the show has established, using conventions recognizable to both anti-porn feminists and Sex Radicals in the same photo. Some are not as well lit; in some, one of the models is wearing leather; some take place in a washroom cubicle; in some, one model's gaze is specifically directed at the other model, while in others it is directed at the viewer; in some, the relaxed "blissful" look is replaced with a more tense, strained expression; in some, you can see genitals, in others teeth; in some, one model is fully clothed while the other is nude; and some depict threesomes. Each of these things signifies the "bad girl" side of the debate, but they are placed in photos which are still at least partly constructed around the conventions of feminist erotica. Playing with the conventions which Radical Feminist discourse has valorised, rather than abandoning them, leads to a tension both within the photos, and in the commentary about them. It is in these "in-between" photos that some of the most interesting work of Drawing the Line occurs.

These "in-between" images do not allow for easy alignment to either an anti-porn or a pro-sex perspective. It is precisely the disjuncture in the photos' compositions that leads to an interpretive problem for viewers. For example, one photo depicts one of the models draped over the thigh of another. The model on top is completely nude while the model on the bottom is wearing torn jeans, held together by a number of safety pins, and boots. The uneven distribution of clothing suggests "objectification"; the boots and jeans can be easily interpreted as soft S/M iconography. And yet the photo is also composed of some very contrasting conventions. The focus is on the whole of the nude model's body, not just portions of it; the bodies are physically relaxed, there is no strain or urgency present; and the scene is staged on a carefully draped and flowing satin sheet. It prompts one viewer to ask: "Why do I feel so awkward?"

I would answer that viewer that her awkwardness highlights the power and success of the show itself in creating a possibility for seeing differently. These images jostle the presumed knowledge of both poles in the Sex Wars, not allowing either side to imagine that its particular frame of reference is the "right," "good," or even "sexy" one in opposition to the other. In blurring the opposition between these two positions, Kiss & Tell create the possibility of a different way of seeing, one where an S/M dyke can eroticise satin, or a vanilla dyke can eroticise black leather boots. The photos play with just enough familiarity in iconography to produce attraction, yet just enough opposition to produce discomfort. The result, what the viewer terms "awkward," is an expanded notion of both representation and sexuality. Viewers can imagine an expanded field of what they might find exciting to look at as well as what they might find exciting to do.

By engaging with and complicating many of the debates of the Sex Wars, Drawing the Line at once speaks to existing communities and norms, while at the same time it functions to construct a community of viewers, to engender new debates, and to create new erotic possibilities. The very structure of the show creates a viewing community. By encouraging women to interact with the photos by writing on the wall, Kiss & Tell does not allow for a detached relationship to its work. There is no private space of quiet contemplation, no position from which to assume mastery over the images. The show forces women to recognize that their interpretation of these photos takes place in a broader context, that other women see the photos differently, and that their own reactions and readings are part of a larger debate.

In so doing, the show (and the book) encourage both reflection and action, activities which are vital to any sub-culture. Sub-cultures cannot rely on information being shared with their members through the mainstream, least of all queer sub-cultures. In a society which primarily structures lesbian behaviour within the power fields of deviance and illness, the importance of images which portray a variety of experiences cannot be overstated. As one viewer demonstrates in response to a particular photo: "Was inspired to try this out. It's wonderful, but hard on bad backs." The images do not simply portray existing practices; they in fact encourage their viewers to new forms of action. But Drawing the Line also goes a step further, by placing these potential actors in a field of power relations, forcing them to recognize and consider the relationships between their own actions and pleasures, and the field of power relations which constitute them.

In generating these alternative actions and pleasures, Kiss & Tell come far closer to embodying Foucault's *ars erotica* than his *scientia sexualis*. As I've discussed in both the Introduction and Chapter 1, within the regime of the *scientia sexualis*, "the perversions" are enumerated, classified and explained, in order to subject them to power. *Ars erotica,* on the contrary, searches for truth through pleasure, and transmits this new knowledge of pleasure through the secret. The *scientia sexualis* produces information, information which is then deployed to regulate and control sexuality. Actions can be easily interpreted as good or bad, feminist or anti-feminist, according to a pre-existing grid of information. *Ars erotica*, on the contrary, *educates*; it does not provide conclusions, but rather possibilities. If one of the viewers of Drawing the Line was "inspired to try this out," the comment of another woman is an even more compelling indication of the work that this exhibit does. She writes: "This whole thing gives me a chance to find out without asking." Here we have a woman who has been told the secrets, and has been changed by this other knowledge of pleasure.

State Interventions: Butler and Canada Customs

Kiss & Tell insist that such change has ramifications well beyond the private. Indeed, their later work asserts that discursive representation is intimately connected to representation in the political sense. Between the original mounting of Drawing the Line and the publication of Her Tongue on My Theory, two significant state interventions were changing the field of sexually explicit representation in Canada. The first is the Supreme Court decision in *R. v. Butler* (now commonly referred to as the *Butler* decision), and the second is Canada Customs' consistent harassment of gay and lesbian bookstores.[61] Each of these events saw agents of the state policing sexually explicit representation, particularly sexually explicit queer representation, in alarming new ways.

The *Butler* decision, handed down in February of 1992, saw the first major intervention into obscenity legislation in Canada in decades. The key feature of the decision was that it purported to move away from a moral understanding of obscenity (heretofore embodied in a "community standards" test, a test which it is important to note *did not* end with Butler[62]) and instead adopted much of Radical Feminism's "harm-based" rhetoric. The decision states that

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[61] Feminist and independent bookstores were also frequent targets of Canada Customs. However, it is the specific harassment of gay and lesbian bookstores, and the gay and lesbian community's response to that harassment, which is central to the analysis of Her Tongue on My Theory.

[62] In fact, Butler reiterates the centrality of the "community standards" test, and elaborates it as "concerned not with what Canadians would not tolerate being exposed to themselves, but with what they would not tolerate other Canadians being exposed to." For two analyses of how the community standards test is underwritten by class anxieties, see Thelma McCormack and Walter Kendrick.

> There has been a growing recognition in recent cases that material which may be said to exploit sex in a "degrading or dehumanizing" manner will necessarily fail the community standards test, not because it offends against morals but *because it is perceived by public opinion to be harmful to society, particularly women.* (R. V. Butler, para. 3, my emphasis)

The decision wrote into law that particular kinds of pornography ("degrading or dehumanizing") cause harm, particularly to women.

While the contention that the *Butler* decision writes Radical Feminist principles into law has been subject to debate[63], it is nonetheless true that the *Butler* decision was at least partly formed by the discourses which had been circulating through the 1970s and 1980s as "The Sex Wars." The status of LEAF, Women's Legal and Education and Action Fund, the largest feminist legal lobby in Canada, as interveners in the case brings feminist discourses on pornography into the judicial arena. Indeed, much of the language of LEAF's brief found its way into the final judgement, and the judgement itself was trumpeted in many circles as a feminist victory. While I agree with Brenda Cossman that "the *Butler* decision and its discourse of harm against women is really just sexual morality in drag" (108), I see no contradiction in asserting that Butler constitutes a victory for both conventional moralism and anti-porn feminism. Protecting society from harm and protecting women from harm may be expressions of differing world views, and they may be very differing practices, but, as Butler demonstrates, they are not very different in the language of judgements. Feminist organizations like LEAF may be unwittingly in consort with right-wing anti-pornography organizations, for as Lise Gotell argues

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[63] For an excellent analysis of how the *Butler* decision does not constitute a break with moral interpretation, see Brenda Cossman, "Feminist Fashion or Morality in Drag? The Sexual Subtext of the *Butler* Decision" in Cossman et al.

> All rely upon moral claims; all share a conception of sexuality as being dangerous and out of control; all emphasize women's passivity and powerlessness in the face of sexual danger; all view sexual expression as devoid of positive meaning; all embrace an understanding of the law as capable of objective determination; and all unequivocally support the necessity of continued criminal regulation of sexual imagery. (51)

Whatever assumptions about sex, sexuality, representation and law undergird this position, the decision nonetheless marks the movement of Radical Feminist discourse from one field of power, the Sex Wars, to another, the state. The rhetoric of Radical Feminism – that pornography is harmful to women – has now become the rhetoric of the courts. If "The Sex Radicals Won the Sex Wars," as my fridge magnet contends, it is a hollow victory when the Anti-Pornographers are winning over state apparatuses.

Just as the discourses of Radical Feminism made available to the judiciary a new and "progressive" way to target "obscene" materials, so has the *Butler* decision itself made available to Radical Feminism a new and compelling anti-porn stance in Canada. Pornography can now be attacked on the grounds that it violates women's right to equality under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.[64] These grounds supercede any complexities in the representations: the context of the representations is immaterial (a national community standard of tolerance still prevails); the sexuality of the participants is immaterial (gay porn, apparently, can be equally harmful to women); and, quite alarmingly, consent is immaterial. "Degrading or dehumanizing" representations are now reified in Canadian law as harmful to women.

The problems with the *Butler* decision are multiple, but two glaring examples of its co-operation with a homophobic society are particularly troubling to the gay and lesbian community in Canada. The first is the fact that the decision itself was at least partly generated by a play on homophobia. The Women's Legal Education and Action

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[64] In fact, during a heated debate on state censorship which I attended at the University of Alberta in March of 2001, the 1973 Bernardo Bertolucci film Last Tango in Paris was invoked to demonstrate how notions of obscenity change over time. The speaker contended that while the film was banned in Canada in 1972, few people would find it obscene today. In response, one participant adamantly insisted that the film "violated" her "Charter Rights."

Fund (LEAF), the primary feminist interveners in the case, made the argument that men (playing passive or bottoming roles) in gay male pornography are analogous to women in heterosexual pornography. In an article by Michelle Landsberg in Ms. Magazine celebrating the *Butler* decision, LEAF counsel Kathleen Mahoney is quoted as saying:

> among the seized videos were some horrifically violent and degrading gay movies. We made the point that the abused men in these movies were being treated like women – and the judges got it. Otherwise, men can't put themselves in our shoes. (14)

While the critical problem of re-writing gay male pornography into a heterosexual interpretive framework is certainly troubling, the homophobia implicit in both LEAF's point and the resulting decision is cause for great alarm in non-heterosexual communities. It should come as no surprise, then, that the second consequence of Butler's homophobia has been its application to gay and lesbian businesses and materials. In fact, the first application of Butler was an obscenity conviction for Glad Day Bookstore, a gay and lesbian shop in Toronto, for selling an issue of Bad Attitude which contained Trish Thomas's story "Wunna My Fantasies."[65]

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[65] For an analysis of the Bad Attitude trial, see Becki L. Ross, "It's merely designed for Sexual Arousal: Interrogating the Indefensibility of Lesbian Smut" in Cossman et al.

The *Butler* decision, however, was not the only offensive being launched against sexual minorities in the early 1990s in Canada. For much of the late 1980s and most of the 1990s, Canada Customs engaged in an on-going offensive against lesbian and gay bookstores in Canada by abusing the power of seizure granted to it by the state.[66] Canada Customs acts as an administrative, as opposed to legal, arm of the federal government, responsible for, among other things, deciding what may or may not cross our national borders. In making these determination, Customs is legally bound by the definition of obscenity in the Criminal Code. In practice, however, customs officers rely on an interpretive document, D-911, which outlines the components of a representation which will render that representation obscene. The result is that something which would not be criminally actionable within Canada can, nonetheless, be denied entry into Canada (an irony which finds its parallel in the fact that it can be illegal to represent perfectly legal sex acts, yet legal to represent crimes such as murder). For example, D-911 prohibited "depictions or descriptions of anal penetration, including depictions or descriptions involving implements of all kinds" until 1987, while those same depictions and descriptions were not necessarily obscene under the criminal code.

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[66] For an excellent account of the battles between Canada Customs and Canada's lesbian and gay booksellers, see Catherine Jones, "Patrolling the Borders: Censorship and Gay and Lesbian Bookstores, 1982-1992" [MA Thesis, Department of Canadian Studies] Carleton University, 1993.

In addition to the disjunction between the Criminal Code and its enforcement, the appeal process for detained items is lengthy and the onus is on the importer to prove the "innocence" of the materials. Even if the materials are cleared for entry after a protracted battle, Canada Customs cannot be held accountable for detaining them unnecessarily, damaging them extensively, or disposing of them altogether.[67] Since the mid-1990s, Canada Customs has improved its internal guidelines, revising D-911 in 1994, 1997, and 1999. However, it would be anachronistic to suppose that these changes were foreseeable, or even imaginable, in the context that Kiss & Tell are speaking to.

While the regulations seem to be value free in that they apply to all importers equally, the reality is that Canada Customs has exerted its power of seizure most widely and consistently against women's bookstores, gay and lesbian bookstores, and particular distributors of small press materials. The Supreme Court, in fact, stated in its ruling in the Little Sister's case that "Customs treatment was high-handed and dismissive of the appellants' right to receive lawful expressive material which they had every right to import." The Supreme Court ruling confirmed what queer communities had known all along: that the application of state policies was discriminatory.

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[67] Finally granted a hearing in the Supreme Court of Canada, the Vancouver store Little Sister's won a partial victory in 2000. While they failed to have the Court overturn the power of Canada Customs to seize materials being imported to Canada, they did succeed in their claim that they had been unfairly targeted by Canada Customs and that Customs' actions infringed on their constitutional right to equality. Another significant and interesting failure in the case, however, was the assertion by the Court that the materials were subject to "the national community standard of tolerance" which "relates to harm, not taste, and is restricted to conduct which society formally recognizes as incompatible with its proper functioning" (*Little Sister's Book and Art Emporium v. Canada (Minister of Justice)* para. 4).

The combination of the tacit homophobia of the *Butler* decision and the explicit homophobia of Canada Customs has a significant impact on gay and lesbian communities in Canada. As Marusia Bociurkiw has lucidly observed, "the state is not neutral, nor is it stupid. It knows that it's culture that keeps a movement alive" (27). While Kiss & Tell may have had the "luxury" of engaging primarily with feminist debates about lesbian sexuality and sexually explicit representation in Drawing the Line, by the mid 1990s they were faced with a climate where the state was a significant creator and intervener in those same discourses. Not only had the obscenity regime exerted its power against the queer community as a whole, but Kiss & Tell had also had some of their own photographs from Drawing the Line seized by Canada Customs. Because Canadian gay and lesbian communities are almost entirely dependent on American productions for cultural expression, the tightening of obscenity laws and the unequal treatment of gay and lesbian publications by Canada Customs had a significant impact on gay and lesbian communities in Canada. To fail to take on this harassment would have had unacceptable consequences. Her Tongue on My Theory faces some of the difficult questions which the *Butler* decision and the actions of Canada Customs generate: What kind of participation in the nation is possible for lesbian sexual expression? What are the perils of getting into bed with the state? And, perhaps most pointedly, what might constitute a radical sexual politics in the face of Radical Feminism's integration, albeit an imperfect integration, into state apparatuses, and the reassertion of those state apparatuses against dissident expression?

Do You Want to be a Citizen of *this* Nation?

There are two significant consequences to the *Butler* decision and harassment by Canada Customs: the first is the state's reiteration and validation of its role in the "protection" of its citizens and the second is the restructuring of the field of debate to one of "rights" claims. These two consequences reestablish a particularly damaging dynamic of establishing lesbians as a class of persons, entitled to (and consequently fighting for) equal access to citizenship within the nation. Thus Glad Day books is forced to articulate in the courts the "rights" of lesbians to sexually explicit representation and Little Sister's is forced to assert its "rights" to import lawful expressive material. The field of debate has been restructured to preclude any recourse that is not articulated through the language of rights.

An appeal predicated on rights discourse does not serve to undermine the concept of the nation or its attendant concept of citizenship. On the contrary, the discursive shift toward rights discourse has the consequence of reasserting the primacy of these very categories. As Wray puts it:

> Citizenship and 'rights discourse' exist in a reciprocal relationship to one another: to attain citizenship means that one has a specific claim to certain inalienable rights under national laws while, conversely, these rights are only conferred when one is marked as a citizen. (30)

But fighting for citizenship and/or rights is always already doomed to failure – especially for queers.

One of the most forceful demonstrations of the pitfalls of appealing to citizenship is Cindy Patton's 1997 essay "To Die For." In it, she argues that "in articulating ourselves as unjustly deprived of civil rights, we participate in American citizenship, we respond to the desire for rights that will assimilate us to the whole of the nation" (344-5). However, by examining the role of homosexuals in the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) hearings, Patton discovers how the very construction of citizenship and nation rely on the empathetic exclusion of the homosexual. She argues that while the communist embodied a fairly straightforward threat to the American nation by virtue of being loyal to a different world order, the threat of the homosexual is far more complex.

> [T]he un-natural, can-not-be-helpedness of homosexuality makes the homosexual's apparent choice to love man over country a passive rejection of the political love that underwrites modern nationality. (336)

While the homosexual may not be loyal to a different world order, s/he is not loyal to *this* one.

As such, the homosexual represented "the limit case of a new kind of citizenship" taking shape during the 1950s (331). In the post-war period, America was concerned with delineating a new form of citizenship, a form of citizenship which did not require a commitment to kill for one's country as it had in the past, but rather required an empathy toward one's fellow citizens as the expression of love for one's country. In Patton's words:

> In fact, the communist who wanted a world order and the homosexual who preferred love of fellow citizens to love of nation were opposites that constituted a third term: the anti-communist citizen with appropriate empathy towards others. (333)

The persecution of communists and homosexuals by HUAC was central to establishing this new form of citizenship.

A concept of citizenship which is founded on defining itself against the homosexual makes the full assimilation of the homosexual to the nation impossible and renders any recourse to a discourse of rights suspect. This dynamic and incompatible relationship between the homosexual and the nation speaks to me of a crucial paradox: while it is possible to *be* a homosexual within the nation, it is not possible to *act* like one. The nation allows (and actively encourages) homosexuals to claim the status of minority and fight for equality rights, thus leaving the terms by which the nation understands and represents itself intact. However, once one begins to *act* like a homosexual, the very terms by which the nation defines itself are under assault because active love of man (or woman) is at odds with the "political love that underwrites modern nationality." The nation, it seems, is happy to adopt a quazi-religious injunction to "love the sinner but hate the sin." I will return to this paradox of being versus acting shortly.

How are we then to address this paradox and fashion a politics which does not fall into the trap of asserting rights claims? Patton provides us with a compelling injunction.

> To be an effective new form of politics, queer must break from the legacy of the nation that social movements have inherited, must avert the collapse of community into quarantine camp that the fact of AIDS makes all too easy. Queer must find a way to place its face outside nation, not, as some activists have urged, as a sinkhole in the circulation of capital, but as a refusal of political love. (346)

This call is the call that Kiss & Tell heed in Her Tongue on My Theory.

Her Tongue on My Theory

Her Tongue on My Theory is a collection of essays, photographs, still images from video, and pornographic narratives. The six essays, which explore the Sex Wars, censorship, collaboration, transgression, and the law, occupy the top two-thirds of the pages. The pornographic stories, each named after a different city, occupy the bottom third of the pages. The photographs and video stills, all taken from Kiss & Tell's performance piece "True Inversions," appear in both sections of the pages. While the essays explicitly engage with the politics of lesbian sex, sexually explicit representation, and the state, the more transgressive work of the book is done in the pornographic narratives, where lesbian sex and desire transcend and freely flow across the very national boundaries which would seek to contain them. Far from putting forward a politics of "belonging" within the nation, Kiss & Tell actively destabilizes the concept of nation by showing just how arbitrary and permeable the imagined "lines" of national borders can be.

The essays which make up the collection were largely written based on the artists' talks during the tour of Drawing the Line. As a result, they represent a cumulative and communal effort at understanding the role of sexually explicit representation within the lesbian community. As Kiss & Tell write in the introduction to Her Tongue on My Theory:

> The best parts of those trips were the late night intense and personal discussions about sex, censorship, and life in general, with people we had just met. At the talks and afterwards we heard all kinds of people's ideas and experiences and crazy dreams. A question that stumped us at a presentation in one city often was answered by someone else in another city, and would eventually get written into our artists' talk. (2)

Her Tongue on My Theory seeks to continue this conversation, to push the limits of the debate, and to generate a community where representation and analysis change what it is possible to see and to know.

While the essays represent an expansive conversation about the nature of sexually explicit lesbian representation in much the same way that the Drawing the Line exhibit and book had, Kiss & Tell found themselves engaging with debates outside of the lesbian community as well. The essays may be based on the artists' talk for Drawing the Line, but all of them are at least partly informed by the implications of the *Butler* decision, Canada Customs' harassment, and the controversy surrounding the group's performance piece, "True Inversions," a performance piece consisting of slides, video, and monologues investigating lesbian sexuality, representation and fantasy.[68] Performed at the Banff Centre for the Arts in November of 1992, it was subsequently reviewed in the ultra-right-wing Alberta Report. This review prompted the Deputy

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[68] For an analysis of the show, see Wray.

Premier of Alberta to refer to it as "this abhorrent lesbian show." The controversy which ensued pitted anti-censorship activists against neo-conservatives in a polemical debate on the appropriateness of state funding for the arts, a debate which placed Kiss & Tell in the uncomfortable position of poster girls.

"Against the Law: Sex Versus the Queen," deals explicitly with the *Butler* decision, examining the language of both the decision itself and LEAF's factum, pointing out the dangers that this kind of precedent poses to queer communities. In it, Kiss & Tell outline the decision as well as the uses which have been made of it, painting a grave picture of the current state of obscenity legislation in Canada. They outline some of the key problems with the decision, pointing out that neither the *Butler* decision nor the LEAF factum "differentiates between sexual images produced by men and those produced by women, or between fantasy and reality, or coercion and consent" (80). They also observe that obscenity legislation is "already steeped in conservative moral values and an analysis of sexuality that is profoundly anti-woman" (79). In fact, most of the arguments which have been put forward in opposition to the *Butler* decision are to be found in the pages of Her Tongue on My Theory.

But while these critiques serve the purpose of informing readers about both the decision itself and its interpretation by its detractors, they do little to posit an alternative politics. To unravel and dispense with the political implications of the decision simply leaves a void: it does not provide a new or different framework for envisioning or understanding sexually explicit representation. Kiss & Tell do attempt to grapple with solutions and/or strategies in the essays which might alter this picture, but they most often come in the form of suggestive questions, not concrete answers. "How does pornography *actually function*? Is it the same everywhere, for everyone? Are there differences from community to community? Cultural and class differences? Urban/rural differences? How does lesbian and gay porn function within *our* communities?" (84). And again later, "But do I have to keep chopping up my identities, with some parts visible and others masquerading as universal, and still others dismissed as irrelevant? Do we have to always speak as this fragment and that fragment? Does this language have the words to speak our simultaneous selves?" (107-8). While Kiss & Tell are able to engage with the state on its own terms in the essays, critiquing its actions and exposing its dangers, they are unable to provide an alternative to the state's terms. The essay as a form is able to speak back and serve as a critique, but it cannot actively embody something else. That task is left to the pornographic.

It is through the inclusion of the pornographic that Kiss & Tell refuse to allow state apparatuses to unilaterally reframe the debate in their own terms. While they actively engage with the issues which state regulation forces them to face, they also recognize the perils of art and politics based solely on those terms.

> In the process of writing these essays, Lizard started saying, 'We never talk about sex anymore, we only talk about theory.' After she'd said it

> many times, we finally recognized it as an issue we had to confront, not just a passing complaint about life in Kiss & Tell. The issue was lust. (3)

They solve this problem by writing a series of pornographic stories which run along the bottom of the text "proper." The stories form a literal subtext to the more overtly political essays which make up the piece. Each is centred on the unnamed narrator, a member of a famous lesbian art collective, and her pursuer / lust object / lover, the phantasmatic Halifax. Each story takes place in a different city, some within Canada and some without. It is in these stories that the work complicating and undermining the concept of the "nation" occurs.

It doesn't surprise me that the more effective work of undoing the nation takes place in the pornographic narrative. As Patton demonstrates, the legacy of the Post WWII moment has had profound implications for new social movements. If we acknowledge that the discourse of "civil rights" stands in the way of radical social change,[69] then it is no surprise that theories and politics which have grown out of that history, including most feminisms, would have difficulty disavowing that same discourse. Porn, however, has a different history.

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[69] I recognize that this is a contentious claim, but it is one that I make unequivocally. Rights discourse is intimately bound to systems of liberal democracy and discourses of individuality. While social change may happen within liberal democracy, *radical* social change, that is, change that significantly alters the basic structure of society, does not. I will turn to the political problems of individuality when I discuss Guy Hoquenghem in Chapter 4.

I would like to return for a moment here to a paradox which I introduced earlier in this chapter, that is, the paradox that one can *be* a homosexual within the nation, but one cannot *act* like one. Being a lesbian poses no inherent threat to modern nationality, but, as we have seen, acting like one does. Thus, private citizenship is available to lesbians, while a public body politic is not.[70] I would like to extend this injunction against acting, particularly acting in the public sphere, to the sphere of representation and, more importantly for my purposes, the pornographic. To produce and/or distribute sexually explicit lesbian representations is troubling for the state because it crosses the boundary between "being" and "acting," and, as a result, muddies the distinction between the "private" and the "public." Indeed, this is a boundary that the state legislation explicitly polices when it comes to pornographic representation. The *Butler* decision states:

> The subject matter of s. 163 of the *Code*, obscene materials, comprises the dual elements of representation and content, and it is the combination of the two that attracts criminal liability. Obscenity is not limited to the

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[70] I would like to clarify here that while many theoretical analyses of "being" recognize it as a discursive performance, the nation does not and it is what the nation demands of its citizens that I am interested in here.

> acts prohibited in the *Code*: Parliament ascribed a broader content to it *because it involves a representation.* Obscenity leads to many ills. Obscene materials convey a distorted image of human sexuality, *by making public and open elements of human nature that are usually hidden behind a veil of modesty and privacy.* (*R. V. Butler*, para 6, my emphasis)

The syntax here is clear: rendering the private public is the method by which obscene materials convey their distorted image.

While the essay portion of Kiss & Tell's text grapples with what it might mean to *be* a lesbian in the current context of the Canadian state, the pornographic narratives, photographs and video stills engage in a different project: Kiss & Tell continue to *act* like lesbians, placing that action both inside and outside the nation, providing a suggestive example of Patton's injunction that "Queer must find a way to place its face outside nation" (346).

The first story in the series is titled "Halifax," the city in which the story is set, and the name which then attaches to our protagonist's lust object throughout the rest of the stories. In it, a captivating woman in the audience seduces a member of a famous lesbian art collective. The discourse of the Sex Wars is the first to be integrated into the pornographic narrative, as the characters end up in a coffee shop where Halifax forces the protagonist to talk about her anti-porn activist days, making her describe the things that turned her on in the anti-porn slide shows. The answer is telling: "I liked the ones where they still had some clothes on. I liked the ones where they were doing it in public" (19). Our protagonist immediately signifies as a sexual "bad girl," turned on by some of the same types of images that we've already seen on the "bad girl" side in Drawing the Line. This political foreplay is followed by a sexual encounter in a public washroom.

While the washroom sex in the story "Halifax" primarily signifies "bad girl" sex in terms of the Sex Wars, Kiss & Tell recognize that it doesn't always have the luxury of solely engaging with political debates. In the story "Edmonton," for example, Halifax barely rescues our protagonist from a bashing at the hands of adolescent skinheads. In this story, the perils of public lesbianism are all too real (and really hot); the threat of discursive discipline is replaced by the threat of bodily harm. Our characters, however, are not silenced or made invisible by this threat. The story not only operates on a metaphorical level, where lesbian lust continues in spite of the omnipresent threat of hate-fuelled violence, but also operates on a literal and material level. The characters have sex on a rooftop over the alley where the skinheads are searching for them, defiantly refusing to give over public space.

Undermining the distinction between public and private space, and the actions appropriate to each, runs through all of the stories in Her Tongue on My Theory. All of the stories feature sex in public places: in "Sydney" on the streets at Mardi Gras; in

"Toronto" in a library; in "Boston" in a park; and in "Hometown" in a motel room. Kiss & Tell are not content with a politics which relegates lesbians to the private sphere; through enacting these narratives in public places, they *act*, creating a public space for lesbian sex and sexuality. In fact, the only story which features sex in a private place is "Vancouver," but even that is compromised. Not only is "Vancouver" a group scene, and thus, not properly private, but it is also set in an apartment which none of the characters has a right to be in. In other words, not only does "Vancouver" enact public sex in the way that the other stories do, but it also deliberately transgresses the sanctity of private property. Halifax and our protagonist are publicly sexual; they *act* as lesbians.

But it is perhaps through the character of Halifax herself that the most subversive work of the pornographic narratives is done. In the story for which she is named, she is strangely familiar to our protagonist. "I don't know this woman, or do I?" (15), she asks. Our protagonist recognizes Halifax, and Halifax knows our protagonist, even though they have never met. This strange familiarity recurs throughout the stories, as the chameleon-like Halifax re-appears as a "flannel shirt," a university student, and even a man. We are alerted to Halifax's metamorphoses in "Edmonton."

> I looked. Then I looked again. It was Her. That Woman. The one who fucked me over (and over and over) in Halifax. And she was staring at me.

> I looked away, confused. It couldn't be Her. She was three thousand miles away. And she looked different. Her hair was the wrong colour. Her face was the wrong shape. She was too thin. It had to be someone else.
>
> But it was Halifax. I recognized the eyes, the angle of her head, the way she sat, arms crossed, legs spread. (28)

She is recognized again in "Sydney." "This woman is achingly familiar to me. I want to touch her. But I *don't* know her. I know nothing about her" (39). And in "Vancouver": "she also looks a bit familiar. But it couldn't be." (51) And in "Toronto":

> She had a very familiar look, but could it be Halifax? I mean, by now I was used to her changing a lot, but she had always had an analysis. Now I was cruising some college student who thought the library was a good place to read comics. (72)

And then, again, in Boston: "'Have we met?' I ask him. 'You look familiar'"(83). Far from being a set character in the stories, Halifax is an allegorical figure who represents the narrator's own lust, a lust which she finally recognizes in "Boston." "That is when I saw her. One utterly insane moment of perfect clarity and I saw who she really was. I laughed aloud at the simplicity of her ruse" (91).

This lust is significant in two ways: it is mobile and it is public. In her mobility, Halifax transgresses the imagined national borders which would seek to both contain and exclude her. Not only can lesbian lust be discovered in any variety of bodies, it can be found in any variety of locations. In her publicness, Halifax acts like a lesbian. She at once asserts her place within the nation (in Edmonton, in Vancouver, in Boston), while rejecting the "proper" place to which the nation would assign/consign/resign her. This simultaneous assertion and rejection exposes the ways that the nation is unable to contain/constrain her. The lesbian who acts like a lesbian (be she our protagonist or Halifax) does not seek, as Patton would name it, her "rightful" place within the nation as citizen; she destabilizes each of those terms, creating a slippery and suggestive subject for her readers to lust after, an arousing possibility.

The sexually explicit representations in Drawing the Line and Her Tongue on My Theory do important erotic and political work. They challenge conventional, heterosexist, feminist, and lesbian conceptions of lesbian sex and sexuality by blurring the representational boundaries between "good" sex and "bad" sex, forcing their viewers to confront their own interpretive complicity with different regimes of meaning-making; they inform us about the politics and possibilities of sexually explicit representation by bringing their representational strategies to the foreground and not allowing them to be the unacknowledged and unexamined basis for politics; they provide an alternative politics to the discourse of citizenship and the nation by showing the ways that lesbian sex and sexually explicit representation both challenge and transgress the imaginary borders of the nation. But perhaps most importantly, they provide both information and education, showing us how to imagine and enact our own possibilities and politics, born of our own communities and our own lusts.

Chapter 3

Countermemory, History, Community: Joan Nestle

Living with history may be burdensome, but the alternative is exile.

Memory is a people's gift to themselves.

Joan Nestle

While Kiss & Tell actively produce community through the circulation of art and ideas in the present day, and while they actively trouble and undermine the concept of the nation state and its inherent concept of citizenship, Joan Nestle turns instead to history to achieve the same ends. In many ways, Nestle's erotic histories serve the purpose of re-placing lesbians into a history which has all but erased them. They re-enter the "Restricted Country" of historicism. At the same time, however, and more compellingly for my project, the circulation of those histories in the present moment compels us to recognize the connectedness of the present and the past, their "Fragile Union," thus changing the politics and erotics of today. In this sense, Nestle's histories are productive, generative and affective. They not only change our understanding of the past, they change our understanding of ourselves and our own communities in the present and for the future. What I want to argue here is that communities are built on collective memories: memories of spaces, memories of struggles, memories of practices, and memories of pleasures. But I also want to make clear that the way that we make those memories will structure the kind of community we build. We can make memories which will serve the interests of the heteronormative capitalist state, or we can make memories which defy and refuse incorporation to that state. Joan Nestle's narratives of memory, I will argue, serve the second purpose, building a community of defiance and contestation rather than one of assimilation and consumption.

The histories which Nestle writes would find their closest counterpart in feminist histories: histories which recognize that the documentation of great men and great events leave out much of the substance and many of the actors in historical moments. In addition to sharing this premise, Nestle's histories are also methodologically similar: they recount and retell stories of the personal, of the specific. They share the feminist conviction that the lives of individual women are vital to understanding and documenting both historical moments and movements.

And yet, as specifically lesbian histories, they also go a step further. They document sexual and erotic lives. "These times leave their mark on both the body and the imagination, but it is the body that has been most often cheated out of its own historical language, the body that so often appears as the ahistorical force that we simply carry with us..." (A Restricted Country 9). So, while it is Nestle's project to re-place the lesbian in history, she recognizes that she cannot accomplish this without re-writing the historical body of lust, desire, pleasure and pain. "[F]or gay people, history is a place where the body carries its own story" (RC 9).

Nestle recognizes, however, that writing the erotics of the body back into history is not the end of the story. She is also intensely aware of the importance of the erotic as a generative and powerful force which not only accompanies lesbian history, but actually creates it. It is not simply a matter of recognizing that there were erotic lives being led in the past, but that those lives were foundational to the politics which they spawned.

> Erotic writing is as much a documentary as any biographical display. Fantasies, the markings of the erotic imagination, fill in the earth beneath the movement of great social forces; they tell deep tales of endurance and reclamation. They are a people's most private historic territory. This is why I always wince when a gay activist says we are more than our sexuality, or when Lesbian culture celebrants downplay lust and desire, seduction and fulfilment. If we are the people who call down history from its heights in marble assembly halls, if we document how a collective erotic imagination questions and modifies monolithic societal structures like gender, if we change the notion of woman as self-chosen victim by our public stances and private styles, then surely no apologies are due. Being a sexual people is our gift to the world. (RC 10)

Of all of Nestle's political commitments, it is her refusal to "check the body at the door" which is most foundational. While her stories encompass the lives and experiences of a variety of women, from different locations, different classes, and different races, their bodies are bound to their stories. Just as there is no integrity in "official" histories, which exclude so many, so too there would be no integrity to an historical project that excludes the body.

It is, of course, the purpose of this project to read a group of texts produced by lesbians that depict explicit lesbian sex, and there is no shortage of explicit sex in the work of Joan Nestle. While Nestle integrates lust, pleasure and want into almost all of her work, she also writes what could be more narrowly defined as pornographic narratives, the primary purpose of which is to tell the story of sexual acts. I will return to these narratives later in this chapter. However, I would like to highlight here the traces of the pornographic that are found in all of Nestle's writing – her fiction, her creative non-fiction, and her essays – which provide an important context for reading her primarily sexual narratives. In Nestle's work, the pornographic is never separate from the personal, the historical, or the political, just as the personal, historical, and political are never removed from the pornographic. To analyse one is to analyse all.

In her dedication to the preservation of history, both as an archivist and an author of erotic cultural memory, Joan Nestle accomplishes two key ends. Firstly, she furthers the cause of recuperative history; that is, she does not allow "official" history to erase lesbian erotics and/or sexual practices. Secondly, she creates a living *affective* history, a history which, I will argue, actively participates in and shapes lesbian politics and erotics in the present tense moment of their publication and circulation.

Counternostalgia vs. Countermemory

In "Sex Publics, Sex Panics, Sex Memories," Christopher Castiglia identifies two oppositional types of politically-charged memory at work in the consciousness of urban gay men: counternostalgia and counter-memory. Countermemories, he argues, provide us with a complex relationship to the past which can allow us to see our present and future differently, while counternostalgia urges us to "get over" the past and consequently to align our politics with those of the state and the reproductive family. In making this argument, Castiglia draws on Benedict Anderson's explication of the rise of nationalism and national identities, specifically Anderson's contention that "profound changes in consciousness by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesia" (cited in Castiglia 149). Anderson goes on to argue that this amnesia is foundational to the rise of narratives of nationalism. Castiglia modifies Anderson's argument, arguing instead that the "characteristic amnesia" that results from these "profound changes in consciousness" is not, in fact, occasioned "by their very nature," but rather is actively produced through narrative. Where Anderson sees narratives (specifically narratives of nationalism) as the logical by-product of amnesia, Castiglia argues that these narratives serve as the actual producers of cultural amnesia. He names these narratives "counternostalgia" and argues that "like national identities, the sexual consciousness that emerges from such narratives of forgetting and (selective and reformulated) memory serves state interests," namely "the systematic assault on sexualities that diverge from the interests of the privatized and heteronormative reproductive family" (150). In other words, constructing memories that smooth over and thereby homogenize the past sacrifices a politically promising complexity for the sake of respectability and assimilation.

Castiglia uses two compelling accounts of the relationship of contemporary gay men to the "golden years" of the 1970s to examine the political implications of counternostalgia, and to posit an alternative narrative strategy, countermemory, as a more politically useful way of engaging with the past in order to make it more relevant and useful for the present and the future. In the first narrative, Castiglia reads one man's desire to understand and participate in the experience of a public and liberated sexuality that exceeds his own historical moment. I will return to the implications of this narrative in a moment. The second man's narrative, a narrative that condemns the perceived excesses of urban gay male culture in the 1970s, expresses a desire to "leave the past behind" and to get "on with our lives as productive members of society" (152). Castiglia names this second narrative "counternostalgia" because the narrative produces a willful amnesia and a mis-remembering of the 1970s. This narrative of forgetting then allows its author to recreate a gay identity in opposition to his counternostalgic narrative, an identity that is founded on being productive, monogamous, and above all private and individual, precisely the values that the conservative state normalizes through the institutionalization of heteronormativity. It is worth quoting Castiglia at length here because his warnings about the dangers of counternostalgia speak to precisely what is at stake in queer politics of the 1980s and 1990s.

> Counternostalgia is dangerous not only because it represents the past inaccurately but also because it limits present options for non-normative identification, intimacy, and pleasure. The recent resurgence of assimilative political initiatives – for gay marriage, for humane military policy, and for domestic partner benefits, for instance – is sustained by narratives that, in the guise of exposing a corrupt sexual past, directly or implicitly urge queers to distance themselves from the tainted past and to structure their lives along cleaner, healthier lines that end up replicating normative heterosexuality. Working in a culture of sexual paranoia so profound that such ideological work is easily carried out in the guise of common sense, counternostalgia represents sex as a fixed object of moral evaluation, obscures the dominant culture's role in establishing sexual "norms" as a technology of power, and denies the agency of "deviants"

> who use unsanctioned sex to challenge the normalizing structures of mainstream America. (161)

In contrast to the counternostalgia of the second narrative, Castiglia sees the first narrative as an example of what Foucault calls countermemory. In a succinct summation of Foucault, Castiglia defines countermemory as "a compelling narrative of the past composed of memories that exceed official public history" (168). The first narrative articulates a longing for a communal and collective sexuality that is ungoverned by convention, telling secrets of sex in bathrooms and teahouses and cruising parks. In its positive reading of promiscuity and public settings, this narrative presents a sexuality in clear opposition to the heteronormative state. Castiglia persuasively argues that it is acts of countermemory, be they individual or collective, that both recreate and sustain a sexual culture. "Sexual culture... is not a settled space (if one tearoom closes, another will take its place) but a memory of practices, signs, and positionalities that enables tearooms, discos, and cruising areas to travel without disrupting – or at least not for very long – their functions" (167). The key difference between counternostalgia and countermemory is that while counternostalgia seeks to supercede the past and "leave it behind," countermemory makes both the meanings *and* the contradictions of the past available in the present.

While Castiglia is concerned here with the "profound shift in consciousness" occasioned among gay men by the AIDS pandemic, his observations and arguments are equally applicable to the specifically lesbian narrativising of memory in the work of Joan Nestle. The specific shift in consciousness that Castiglia examines, the shift occasioned by AIDS, produces a counternostalgia that disavows the collective and public sexualities of the so-called "pre-AIDS" era among some gay men. However, lesbians are by no means exempt from the sex-negativity inherent to this form of counternostalgia: lesbians are at once perpetrators of the same form of counternostalgia on the one hand, and victims of the mainstream sex panics occasioned by AIDS on the other. Unfortunately, the spread of HIV and AIDS marked a moment for many lesbians of disavowing their affinity with gay men, a disavowal that produced a kind of moral superiority where the ravages of disease could be narrativised as the logical conclusion of the promiscuity of many gay-male subcultures. At the same time, the mainstream perception of lesbians during the sex panic of the Regan/Bush years was ambivalent: they could at once be seen as coextensive with the gay threat of contagion, while at the same time they could be seen as the group most detached from the crisis. So, while lesbians experience the external backlash of the 1980s differently than gay men, they nonetheless often share in the impulse to counternostalgia.

In her essay "Some Understandings," Nestle both recognizes and damns this particularly lesbian counternostalgia:

> In these painful and challenging times, we must not run out on gay men and leave them holding the sexuality bag. It is tempting to some

> Lesbians to see themselves as the clean sex deviant, to dissociate themselves from public sexual activity, multiple partners, and intergenerational sex. While this may be the choice for some of us, it is not the reality of many others, not now and not in the past. Lesbian purity, a public image that drapes us in the cloak of monogamous long-term relationships, discreet at-home social gatherings, and a basic urge to re-create the family, helps no one. It does not do justice to either the choices it supposedly venerates or to our independence. (RC 123)

What Nestle identifies in this passage is both the impulse to misremember both lesbian *and* gay histories, and the political consequences of such an amnesia. Her analysis dovetails precisely with Castiglia's contention that counternostalgia serves the interests of the conservative state. She goes further, however, in examining the implications of the "AIDS crisis" to lesbians:

> If, as Lesbians, we declare ourselves a people under attack for our sexual difference while at the same time we say, 'But we are not as different as they are,' then our assertion that we are victims of sexual judgement is self-serving. We cannot be sexual deviants only when it is safe to be so. (RC 123-4)

In this statement, Nestle refuses the protection which counternostalgia might afford to lesbians, and insists on remembering lesbians' status, both historically and in the present day, as sexual deviants. She also connects this moment of conservative backlash to others in her history and offers us what she calls "a life-long lesson: you do not betray your comrades when the scapegoating begins" (RC 123).

While Nestle recognizes the political implications of the use of memory in relation to the shift in consciousness occasioned by AIDS, I would argue that another profound shift in consciousness was at work in lesbian communities, one that was equally engaged in the production of counter-nostalgia and amnesia: lesbian-feminism. As I have outlined elsewhere in this project, the 1970s saw a shift within feminism from seeing lesbianism primarily as an erotic category to seeing it as a political category. Lesbianism no longer entailed an array of sexual practices shared with other women, but rather a sexual politics with the fundamental goal of women's equality. True to Anderson's formulation, this shift in consciousness produced its own willful amnesia: it deliberately misremembered mainstream feminism's attempts to distance itself from lesbians in the 1960s and early 1970s, and, more importantly to an analysis of Nestle, it sought to erase and vilify lesbian sexuality which, either historically or politically, exceeded or opposed feminist consciousness. Lesbian-feminism generated narratives to produce this amnesia in strikingly similar ways to those which Castiglia identifies: butch/femme identifications were refigured as both as a replication of patriarchal power structures and as outmoded and unnecessary in an age that strove for equality; passing women were dismissed as the embarrassing remnants of a superceded culture; S/M was easily dismissed as both patriarchal and (gay) male-identified. What this erasure shares with Castiglia's analysis is a denunciation of sexualities which are transacted visibly and publicly in favour of those of intimacy and love.[71] Lesbian-feminism heralded the beginning of a new era where the backwardness of the past could be left behind in favour of the political promise of the present and the future.

Again, Nestle is keenly aware of this particular narrative of forgetting, and refuses it just as vehemently. Writing about the Lesbian Herstory Archives, Nestle once again connects her own history to the counternostalgia of the present tense, in order not only to expose the implications of that counternostalgia, but also to offer an alternative politics:

> Because of my own experience with the criminalizing 1950s, I felt it was essential that the archives not become a hand-picked collection of lesbian role models. This emphasis on inclusiveness made the archives the focus of controversy. Yes, we wanted the papers of Samois, the first national public lesbian S/M group. Yes, we wanted the diary of a lesbian prostitute. Yes, we would cherish the pasties of a lesbian stripper. Yes, we wanted collections of woman-with-woman pornography. I know that a memory fashioned to the prevailing precepts of one time, no matter how profound

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[71] I have already outlined, in Chapter 2, the ways in which some strands of feminism rely on concepts like intimacy and love, replicating the romantic structure of what Castiglia calls "the privatized and heteronormative reproductive family" (150).

> that time might be, would never be complex enough, never filled with wonders enough, to be the living needed gift to the unknown future that we all wanted this collection to be. (FU 63-64)

It is against both of these counternostalgias, the sexual conservatism of the Reagan/Bush years fuelled by AIDS phobia, and the moralism of Radical Feminism, that Nestle writes her countermemories.

In extending Foucault's term to the specific context of gay men, Castiglia provides us a way to conceive of countermemory as a history that is "oppositionally and creatively sexual" (Castiglia 168). Countermemories are affective and erotic and they both reflect and produce collectivity. They offer a way of understanding one's position within a community that is not based on the private and conservative directives of the state. Rather than tidily reconciling discordant elements of the past by subsuming uncomfortable details into an overarching narrative of progress, countermemory actively exploits the ragged density of past experience. In Foucault's own words, countermemory "makes visible all those discontinuities that cross us" (Language, Counter-Memory, Practice 162). And valorizing such a project is crucial, since "History will not discover a forgotten identity, eager to be reborn, but a complex system of distinct and multiple elements, unable to be mastered by the powers of synthesis" (161).[72]

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[72] It is in this sense that I see counter-memory as importantly different from nostalgia. The OED defines nostalgia as "regret or sorrowful longing *for* the conditions

Significantly, the complex and contradictory pasts captured by countermemory exceed not only official history but any comfortable history – or, as is frequently the case in Nestle, lesbian official history. While counternostalgic narrative of history might draw a progressive trajectory that moves from the domestic battles of the 1950s through the woman-identified-woman of the 1970s to the emergence of media-celebrated lesbian chic of the mid-1990s, countermemory posits something more complicated. As Nestle puts it, "I see the queer fifties, the Lesbian sixties, the feminist seventies, and it becomes clear to me that memory is something that goes beyond sequential incidents. None of these years have gone away, and none of the experiences are outdated; they, the wonderful jumble of them all, are the source of my politics, my work and my joy" (RC 119). In the gaps and fissures that countermemory refuses to paper over may be found the traces of a practice in the past that can give us new ways of imagining the present we inhabit.

Memory, "Temporal Drag," and the Threat of the Past: Toward an Affective History

Castiglia's analysis of countermemory and counternostalgia bears a telling resemblance to Elizabeth Freeman's discussion of queer theory in "Packing History,

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of a past age; regretful or wistful memory or recall of an earlier time." While counter-memory may sometimes be regretful or wistful, it is also importantly contradictory, challenging and difficult.

Count(er)ing Generations." What Castiglia argues we must attend to in the making of memory, Freeman argues we must attend to in the making and using of theory. Freeman provides a corrective to what Castiglia would call the counternostalgia of a dominant brand of queer theory, namely, the central concept of performativity. In analysing the popular notion of queer performativity, Freeman is troubled by the idea that performativity is always a progressive and forward-looking phenomenon. "Repetitions with any backward looking force, on the other hand, are merely 'citational,' and can thereby consolidate the authority of the fantasized original" (728). Her problem with this formulation is that

> The political result of these formulations can be that whatever looks newer or more-radical-than-thou has more purchase over prior signs, and that whatever seems to generate continuity seems better left behind. But to reduce all embodied performances to the status of copies without originals is to ignore the interesting threat that the genuine *past*-ness of the past sometimes makes to the political present. (178, emphasis original)

What Freeman gives us to think in this analysis of the performative is that this highly influential theoretical framework in fact functions as counternostalgia in Castiglia's terms. In consolidating the simulacrum, that is, the copy for which there is no original, the past can be effectively erased and a presentist narrative can take its place. Like Castiglia, Freeman is unsatisfied with this willful amnesia and works through a theoretical formulation which can account for the "past-ness of the past" while at the same time recognizing the real work done by the past in the present moment.

To get at this "interesting threat" of the past, Freeman turns to the term "generations" in both its temporal and generative definitions, in order to "complicate the idea of horizontal political generations succeeding one another." She invites us to imagine generations not as the "psychic life of the individual" but rather as "the movement time of collective life"(729). In shifting her discursive field from the individual to the collective, Freeman proposes that instead of reading the influence of the past on the present as performance, thus generating a narrative that willfully forgets the past in the pursuit of the present and future, we should instead read that influence as allegory.

> Allegory traffics in collectively held meanings and experiences .... the primary work of queer performativity, rethought as complexly allegorical, might be to construct and circulate something like an embodied temporal map, a political archive for a contingent form of personhood.(734)

Far from forgetting or superceding the past, Freeman urges us instead to pay attention to "temporal drag," something she defines as a "stubborn identification with a set of social coordinates that exceed her historical moment" (728). In doing so, she argues that "reanimating social corpses ... might make social coordinates that accompanied these signs available in a different way"(735). While Castiglia gives us the framework for constructing memories that don't serve state and heteronormative/reproductive interests, Freeman affords us a way of analysing the work that those memories are capable of doing in the present.

From Private to Public: Making Memories into Histories.

What each of these analyses shares as a subtext is a concern with the distinction between the public and the private. In Castiglia, queer counternostalgia is intimately bound up with privatization: the impulse of counternostalgia is to propel its author towards the privatized realms of monogamy, pseudo-heteronormativity, and reproduction. Queer countermemory, on the other hand, is both a collective act and a remembrance of collectivity. Similarly, Freeman's call to employ allegory, rather than an exclusively forward looking performativity, as a category of analysis speaks specifically to collectively held meanings and collective lives. Nestle's narratives constitute just such an act of collective memory: they "traffic in collectively held meanings" and resist counternostalgia. In Nestle's own words:

> We need to know that we are not accidental, that our culture has grown and changed with the currents of time, that we, like others, have a social history composed of individual lives, community struggles, and customs of language, dress, and behavior – in short, that we have the story of a people to tell. To live with history is to have a memory not just of our own lives

> but of the lives of others, people we have never met but whose voices and actions connect us to our collective selves. (RC 110)

While Nestle's narratives often tell the stories of individual memories, those memories are always transacted in the context of either collective settings or communal structures of meaning. She chronicles, for example, her (individual) participation in the (collective) march to Selma. The circulation of individual memories takes on the shape of collective memories. "For the marginalized, remembering is an act of will, a conscious battle against ordained emptiness. For gay people, remembering is an act of alchemy – the transformation of dirty jokes, limp wrists, a wetted pinky drawn over the eyebrow into bodies loved, communities liberated" (Fragile Union 56). The countermemories that Nestle points to here are both individual and collective, and require a way of reading that does not recognize the distinction between the individual and the collective so much as the interpenetration between them. The individual stories of the past form a richly embodied and sexualized history.

As I have argued in my introduction, the relegation of erotic and sexual life to the realm of the private is a dangerous move for sexual minorities. Heteronormativity, the nuclear family structure, and ultimately capitalism and repressive state apparatuses rely on this relegation.[73] As Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner argue in their essay "Sex in Public":

> Intimate life is the endlessly cited *elsewhere* of political public discourse, a promised haven which distracts citizens from the unequal conditions of their political and economic lives, consoles them for the damaged humanity of mass society, and shames them for any divergence between their lives and the intimate sphere that is alleged to be simple personhood. (553)

In other words, the privatization of sex and intimate life, far from liberating its practitioners, serves to reinforce inequality and oppression. At the same time, however, it is important to note that queer sexualities have historically been generated and transacted publicly. Most gay historians, notably John D'Emilio, argue that it is through public spaces (notably the space of the city) that "a group of men and women came into existence as a self-conscious, cohesive minority" (D'Emilio 4).[74] As a community that comes into being by virtue of its very publicness, restructuring it to fit into the realm of the private alone will certainly damage it, and possibly erase it altogether.[75]

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[73] I am reminded here of the "gay" television show *Will and Grace*. The show professes a "what-I-do-in-my-bedroom-is-private-and-otherwise-I'm-just-as-handsome-and-wealthy-and-upwardly-mobile-as-any-other-leading-man-on-TV" philosophy. However, that privatization of Will's sexuality has found its ultimate expression in his decision not only to have a baby with his straight female roommate Grace, but also to do it "the old-fashioned way" by having heterosexual sex. Through privatization, "gay" TV has become *Leave it to Beaver*.

I want to draw this relationship between the public and the private out even further, though, to suggest two distinct, yet interrelated arguments. First, that queer counternostalgia, or willful amnesia, is a strategy of the private. It generates a narrative which dismisses the collectivity of the past in favour of a privatized present and future. Second, that queer countermemory is vital not just for what it may recover from history, but also because it serves as a public, rather than a private, speech act. In publishing and circulating countermemories, Nestle accomplishes what Berlant and Warner call for: "the queer project we imagine ... is to support forms of affective, erotic and personal living that are public in the sense of accessible, available to memory, and sustained through collective activity" (562). She not only preserves and makes available narratives that recall the collectivities of the past, but also reenforces the very publicness of queer sexuality.

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[74] For an analysis of how the specific space of the city structures queer memory, see Dianne Chisholm, "The City of Collective Memory." GLQ 7.2, pp 195-243.

[75] I will return to the importance of the publicness of queer sex in Chapter 4 when I deal explicitly with sexual practices in my analysis of Pat Califia.

Making History

While it is the primary purpose of this chapter to examine Nestle as a writer of histories, this cannot be easily separated from her work as an archivist and preserver of histories. Nestle is the co-founder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, "the largest and oldest Lesbian archive in the world" (LHA website), a collection which Nestle lovingly calls "a public face for lesbian memory" (FU 66). The LHA is based on a set of principles which ensure and encourage both access and an active role in community building:

> - All Lesbian women must have access to the Archives; no academic, political or sexual credentials may be required for usage of the collection; race and class must be no barrier for use or inclusion.
> - The Archives shall be housed within the community, not on an academic campus that is by definition closed to many women.
> - The Archives shall be involved in the political struggles of all Lesbians.
> - Archival skills shall be taught, one generation of Lesbians to another, breaking the elitism of traditional archives.
> - The community should share in the work of the Archives.
> - The Archives will collect the prints of all our lives, not just preserve the records of the famous or the published.
> - Funding shall be sought from within the communities the Archives serves, rather than from outside sources. (LHA website)

This work highlights Nestle's political conviction that the preservation of marginalised histories, as well as the circulation and accessibility of those histories to a broad public sphere, are vital struts in any progressive politics.

There are two key ways that Nestle's role as an archivist functions as a corollary to her role as a writer. The first is in the structure of the archive itself, a structure that parallels both the structure of many of Nestle's individual narratives, and her work as a whole; the second is in the rendering public of what heteronormative society demands be relegated to the private sphere, namely the erotic and sexual lives of lesbians. In an extremely useful explication of the theories of Walter Benjamin, Dianne Chisholm summarizes Benjamin's argument that memory is like

> an excavation site from which 'fragments' of the ruins of past experiences are recovered with 'meticulous digging' .... So conceived, memory provides less of a 'chronicle' than a collection, a gallery of images that reflect part objects of a life or an epoch. Together excavation and collection produce only fragmentary *recollection*. Chronicling these fragments calls on the art of 'history-telling,' which, like storytelling, composes 'short-lived reminiscences' for collective speculation. (206-207)

In preserving the detritus of lesbian lives, the Lesbian Herstory Archives engages in both "excavation and collection," the first step in the making of memory and countermemory. While Nestle's narratives engage in the "history-telling," the "fragmentary recollections" of the archives make that chronicling of history possible to all its users. It serves as a communal basis for the construction of countermemory. In so doing, it stands as a public collection of both those fragments that dominant histories have violently erased, as well as those that heteronormative capitalism relies on banishing to the private sphere, and thus renders inaccessible to collective memory.

Likewise, the "collection" is the very form of Nestle's narratives. Her two sole-author monographs, A Restricted Country and A Fragile Union, are collections of short stories and creative non-fiction; she edited the rest of her books, and all of her other published writing has appeared in other "collections," be they serials or anthologies. Even her most recent writing, an on-line journal entitled The River Diaries, is a fragmented narrative, composed of scattered daily remembrances chronicling her daily life, her love, and her battle with cancer. Further, many of Nestle's texts are themselves disjointed narratives, juxtaposing the stories of different women, the stories of the media or medical establishment, and the memories of Nestle herself. For example, in "Voices From Lesbian Herstory," Nestle quotes journal articles, personal letters, novels and historical events in order to present the complexity of a lesbian history, a countermemory, that is "a source of ideas, visions, tactics, that constantly speak to us" (RC 119), a history that remains active in the present as "the living gift we bequeath to our Lesbian daughters" (RC 119). Nestle recognizes this form of collecting, and its inherent conflict and juxtaposition, as a vital part of her project and her politics. "They [the many layers of history] all may force painful choices at times, but with the conflict comes the glory – that we are all so many constituencies at once" (RC 119).

Countermemory I: Place & Space

A number of Nestle's narratives are concerned with re-animating the spaces and places of the past, from Greenwich Village to Fire Island, from The Lower East Side to Riis Park, from the pink-collar ghettos of the garment district to the butch/femme haven of the Sea Colony. In chronicling these spaces, Nestle resists counternostalgia by insisting on these spaces as places of work, places of politics and places of pleasure. Within the narratives, the space functions in two ways simultaneously: it is constituted to allow particular bodies to move through and with it, while at the same time it generates the bodies within it.

The importance of accessible space to the development of lesbian collectivity cannot be understated. As John D'Emilio frankly states, "As the only clearly identifiable collective manifestation of lesbian existence, the bars filled a unique role in the evolution of a group consciousness among gay women. They alone brought lesbianism into the public sphere" (99). Indeed, while the bars served as the only exclusively lesbian spaces, Nestle also reminds us of the other various spaces that contributed to lesbian collectivity: the mixed spaces of lesbians and gay men and the spaces occupied by working women. At the same time, she also reminds us of the spaces that lesbians occupied where their existence could not be acknowledged, the spaces of political protest marked out by the Civil Rights Movement and union organizing.

For Nestle, it is vital to remember both the way in which space could be restrictive, as well as the ways that it could be productive. In "Lesbian Memories 1: Riis Park," for example, Nestle vividly portrays the importance of an explicitly public queer space to the development of a sense of collective belonging. The story begins with our narrator making her way to the subway, anticipating the sense of belonging that she'll feel when she reaches her destination: "my Riviera, my Fire Island, my gay beach – where I could spread my blanket and watch strong butches challenge each other by weightlifting garbage cans" (RC 46). She cruises the subway car, searching out the other gay passengers before arriving at the end of the line. There, the pronoun shifts from "I" to "we": "We crushed through the turnstiles"; "We would wait on line for the bus." And when the inevitable taunts of *lezzie* and *faggot* began, "we did not care" (RC 47). In her transition through space from Manhattan to Flatbush, our narrator has also moved from being an individual to being a member of a community, a community that affords a degree of safety from those beyond the beach wall, the "teenagers on bikes, pointing and laughing" and the "more serious starers who used telescopes to focus in on us" (RC 48). Nestle never forgets that her community is one that is always subject to surveillance. At the end of the story, a young gay man tragically drowns, and all of the people of the beach escort his body through the crowd of onlookers to the waiting ambulance. In this moment, Nestle recalls, they became "a people to whom respect must be paid" (RC 48). This marks the final moment of collectivity in the story: the people on the beach become not *people* in the sense of being the same as the onlookers, but *a* people, a distinct and different community deserving of respect.

The Sea Colony, a working-class lesbian bar of the 1950s, is perhaps the most clearly and completely narrativized of spaces in Nestle. Indeed, it is given such a complex rendering that in many narratives it effectively becomes a character of its own. In "The Bathroom Line" Nestle depicts the Sea Colony as both a space of liberation and a space of surveillance. "The Sea Colony was a world of ritual display – deep dances of Lesbian want, Lesbian adventuring, Lesbian bonding. We who lived there knew the steps." It was also, however, a world of nets, "mafia nets, clean-up New York nets, vice squad nets"(RC 37). The lesbians who lived in that world carefully navigated between these two poles, protecting themselves from the wrath of the outside world while they actively built and sustained a community of mutual support, desire and lust. Nestle brings this contradiction together in her description of the bathroom line.

> Because we were labelled deviant, our bathroom habits had to be watched. Only one woman at a time was allowed into the toilet because we could not be trusted. Thus, the toilet line was born, a twisting horizon of Lesbian women waiting for permission to urinate, to shit. (RC 38)

They use this, however, as an opportunity, where an entire ritual of joking, flirting and cruising could take place. This contradiction is the lesson that the Sea Colony still has to offer, a lesson about lust, about oppression and ultimately about defiance and survival: "We wove our freedoms, our culture, around their obstacles of hatred" (RC 39). The countermemory of the Sea Colony demands that we remember the foundation of defiance and resistance on which our community is built.

Countermemory II: Class

The configuration of both restricted spaces and productive spaces in Nestle cannot easily be separated from her rewriting of class. Nestle consistently defines herself as a working-class woman, raised in the Bronx by her widowed mother, Regina, who struggled to provide for her two young children. Keenly aware of the impact that her background has had on all of her experiences, Nestle is able to recognize and narrativize the importance of class not only to her own life, but to her community as a whole. She interweaves narratives of her own life with those of others to demonstrate the ways that class inflects both the lesbian community and lesbian sexuality, ultimately demanding a respectful and complex treatment of the lives of working-class women. By creating just such a complex and respectful treatment, both of her own life and those of other working-class women, Nestle writes countermemories that can stand against the counternostalgia of much of 1970s feminism. Many proponents of 1970s lesbian-feminism were explicitly concerned with moving beyond such practices as butch/femme and such identities as passing women. As Becki Ross observes, "lesbian-feminist organizing 1970s style meant the rupture of ties to what were understood as regressive butch/femme roles indigenous to gay bar culture" (The House that Jill Built 41-42). Nestle's countermemories remind us, however, that those categories are deeply embedded in the practices of working-class lesbians, and that the desire to eradicate them is not easily separated from a desire to deliberately forget both working-class lesbians and working-class women and their sexuality. Ultimately, I want to suggest that while Nestle's narratives serve the function of critique as well as corrective, they also make available an "embodied temporal map" (to use Freeman's term) for lesbians of the 1980s and 1990s, serving as an alternative to the legacy of lesbian-feminism.

One of the key concepts that Nestle reminds us of in her narratives is that sexuality is configured differently for different classes of women. Nowhere is this more evident than in her portrayal of her mother. Indeed, it is her characterization of her mother that many of Joan Nestle's countermemories of class are articulated. She paints a picture of a strong, determined woman, victimized by circumstance, but stalwartly refusing to be a victim, a hard-working woman who took pleasure in sex and gambling. In "Two Women: Regina Nestle, 1910-1978, and her Daughter, Joan," Nestle juxtaposes the story of her mother's quest for sexual freedom and satisfaction with her own. She refuses to romanticize her mother or her mother's life, telling the stories of debts and hardships, and, above all, the story of a sexual adventurer.

> My mother's legacy to me was the story of her desire. She has left sexual trails for me, private messages, how she saw her breasts, how her body swelled with want. She has also left the record of her anger, her fury at herself and others for forgetting the connection between generosity and lust. She never knew who to blame for her sexuality, for the rape, because the voices around her said her hunger deserved punishment. (RC 88)

In this story of Regina, Nestle carefully weaves an image of a woman devoid of sexual safety, a working-class woman without a husband, who nonetheless seeks out her pleasures with many men. As a result, she suffers abuse, from being called whore to being sexually and physically assaulted. The lesson that Nestle gains from her mother is simple and powerful: sexual pleasure is something to be worked for, something to be fought for. More soberly, in bearing witness to her mother's story, Nestle reminds us that the world harshly judges and condemns working-class women for their needs.

In "My Mother Liked to Fuck," Nestle sees this same judgement and condemnation of her mother's sexual life, this time in the feminism of Andrea Dworkin. The piece begins with Nestle listening to a panel discussion on pornography and eros. Her mind quickly begins to drift to memories of her mother. She goes on to chronicle some of her mother's life, her sexual exploits, her condemnation at the hands of "respectable women"(RC 121). Brought back to the present moment, she is faced with Dworkin's "litany against the penis" and hears her mother's words, connecting explicitly Dworkin and the "respectable ladies":

> So *nu*, Joan, is this the world you wanted me to have, where I should feel shame and guilt for what I like? ... They called you freak and me whore and maybe they always will, but we fight them best when we keep on doing what they say we should not want or need for the sheer joy we find in doing it. I fucked because I liked it, and Joan, the ugly ones, the ones who beat me or fucked me too hard, they didn't run me out of town, and neither can the women who don't walk my streets of loneliness and need. Don't scream *penis* at me, but help me to change the world so no woman feels shame or fear because she likes to fuck. (RC 122)

I would argue that one of the key reasons for this condemnation at the hands of both the moralists and the lesbian-feminists is precisely that the sexuality of the working class breaches the barrier between the public and the private. As I have already argued in this chapter and in the introduction, the relegation of sexuality to the private sphere serves to reinforce inequality and oppression. While in that instance I was pointing to the significance of that relegation to queer sexualities, it is equally significant to analyses of class. The privatization of sexuality, by definition, requires a private sphere. To be a working-class woman means that there is very little so-called privacy available.

Similarly, the luxury of the private sphere has not historically been available to women outside of heterosexual marriage. This is where Nestle's narratives explicitly draw the link between working-class women and lesbians: each find themselves engaged in public sex, a practice that transgresses middle-class demands that sex remain, in Berlant and Warner's words, an "endlessly cited elsewhere." Nestle lives first in a world where her mother's sexuality is not hidden from her, and then in a world where the sexuality of her friends and neighbours on the Lower East Side is not hidden from her.

While Nestle's own life and that of her mother ground her portrayal of class, an attention to class is present everywhere in Nestle's narratives – sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly. Her stories are peopled with working-class butches and pink-collar femmes: Esther, the passing woman in "Esther's Story" is a cab driver; Jay of "A Different Place" is a construction worker. Likewise, Rachel, "the lewd queen of psychedelic hookers" and Mara, a working-class woman and neighbour, are Lower East side working-class women. Less obviously, in "Lesbian Memories 1: Riis Park," for example, the communal experience that I've already described is only possible by virtue of public transportation; Riis Park is a downscale Fire Island, a "tired beach, filled with the children of boroughs" (RC 48). Nestle often refers to the transition from the working world to the sexual world, for example, bathing for her lover in "Esther's Story" because the "hot water marked the border between my world and theirs" (RC 42). Similarly in "My Woman Poppa," the narrator "must caress the parts of her [my woman poppa] that have been worn thin, trying to do her work in a man's world" (FU 152) before they have sex. In these more subtle markers of class, Nestle portrays the journey of the body from work to pleasure, never allowing the disjunction between working body and the sexual body to seem natural or inherent. Nestle's sexual bodies are not privatized bodies, kept separate in a private realm until they are retreated to for comfort or pleasure; they are the public working bodies that are carried everywhere, that must be worked and worked on to become sexual.

Countermemories of class serve an important function in the 1980s and 1990s, as much of the gay rights movement continues down the path toward privatization, demanding spousal benefits, and marriage and adoption rights. In recreating a complex memory of the lesbian community, particularly the often forgotten history of its working-class components, Nestle's narratives serve as a corrective to a political discourse that by definition excludes many working-class lesbians and gays of the present moment. It also serves as a reminder not of the *sameness* of queers to heterosexuals, but of the *difference*. By remembering class, we can recall that a struggle for equality should not involve those who are disadvantaged changing to become more like their oppressors. It should involve the oppressors changing in order to respect and value the marginalised.

Countermemory III: Race and Ethnicity

Just as Nestle's countermemories of class are grounded in her own experiences, so too are her countermemories of race and ethnicity. In "A Restricted Country," the short story for which the entire collection is named, the Nestles are on their first ever family vacation together at a dude ranch in Arizona. They soon discover, however, that the ranch is "restricted," meaning that no Jews are permitted. Faced with table cards that read: "Because this guest ranch is run like a family, we are restricted to members of the gentile faith only" (RC 30), the young Joan remarks: "It wasn't just my Jewishness that I learned at that moment: it was also the stunning reality of exclusion unto death"(RC 31). Joan's mother, Regina, can be strong and defiant in this obvious moment of anti-Semitism. Refusing to "[enter] through the back door and [eat] by ourselves" the Nestles declined the offer to "pass for gentiles" and informed the manager that they "would not stay under his conditions" (RC 31). Instead, the family was transported to a Jewish ranch. At this new location, however, Joan learns an equally difficult lesson: not only is she marked by her ethnicity, but she is also marked by her class. One afternoon, Joan notices a group of guests laughing at something in the riding ring. As she draws closer, she sees that the spectacle is her own mother.

> Dressed in her checked polyester suit, she sat on top of a large brown gelding attempting to move it .... The intimate spectacle of my mother's awkwardness, the one-sided laughter, and the desperate look on her face pushed me back from the railing. These people were my people; they had

> been kind to me. But something terrible was going on here. We were Jewish, but we were different. (RC 33)

Later, Joan sees her mother on a child's swing in "her too-tight, too-cheap pants" and realizes that "Arizona is not for Regina Nestle, not this resort with its well-married ladies" (RC 32). Nestle will not allow this narrative to become counternostalgia, deliberately forgetting this event in order to create a narrative of belonging built on Jewishness. Rather, she constructs a countermemory which presents the contradictions between belonging and exile, ethnicity and class.

This contradiction is also foregrounded in her memories of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, where she finds belonging on the basis of her ethnicity and her politics, but only by erasing her lesbianism. Nestle recalls:

> I wore a double mask in these early sixties years, in those white restaurants. My first deception was to the enemy: the pose of a nice white person who could be let in and would sit down and eat in quiet tones, ignoring the battle for human dignity that was happening outside the windows. The second was to my friends: the pose of straightness, the invisibility of my queerness. They did not know that when the police entered with their sneers and itchy fingers, I was meeting old antagonists. Perhaps their uniforms were a different color, but in the Lesbian bars of my other world I had met those forces of the state. (RC 52)

Nestle was one of the people who participated in the march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, able to name herself as both Jewish and feminist in applying for the honour of marching, but unable to name herself as a lesbian. While she recognizes that "there is one group of Americans that cannot play with the sixties, cannot give those years back to mockery and disdain" (RC 49), she nonetheless refuses an easy or comfortable memory of those times either. She at once salutes the tireless efforts of activists, but at the same time is compelled to remember the invisibility of her lesbianism.

Just as Nestle reminds us of the invisibility of lesbians within the Civil Rights Movement, so too does she remind us of the invisibility of lesbians of colour within the feminist and lesbian and gay rights movements. "'I Lift My Eyes to the Hill': The Life of Mabel Hampton as Told by a White Woman" chronicles the life of Mabel Hampton, a working-class African-American lesbian who lived and worked in New York from the age of eight. Nestle alerts us early on of the impulse to forget lives like hers, and of the risk we run if we do so.

> In recent years, I have been dazzled at our heady discussions of deconstruction, at our increasingly sophisticated academic conferences on gender representation, at the publication of sweeping communal and historical studies...Mabel Hampton's is the story we are in danger of forgetting in our rush of language and queer theory. (FU 24)[76]

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[76] This caution shares much with Freeman's concern about what queer theory

To remedy this risk of forgetting, Nestle collects the remnants of Hampton's life and tells a story of the complex interplay between Hampton's class, race and sexuality. In doing so, Nestle is able to demonstrate, both through her own telling and through the exposure of her own racism, that each of these categories of intelligibility is insufficient, and that only through understanding the relationships among them can she come to the beginnings of an understanding of this woman.

Nestle recognizes the insufficiency of these categories, and the challenges that this insufficiency poses to the writing of history.

> Lesbian and gay scholars argue over whether we can call a woman a lesbian who lived in a time when that word was not used. We have been very careful about analyzing how our social sexual representation was created by medicalizing terminology and cultural terrors. But here was a different story. Ms. Hampton's lesbian history is embedded in the history of race and class in this country; she makes us extend our historical perspective until she is at its center. The focus then is not lesbian history but lesbians *in* history. (FU 27)

Nestle goes on to employ just such an approach, tracing Hampton's life through the history of slavery and racism in America, her economic dependence on white families (including, at one point, Nestle's own), her experiences of art and theatre during the

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might be losing in its move away from history.

Harlem Renaissance, her incarceration for prostitution, her marriage to Lillian Foster, her life in the Bronx as "Miss Mabel," her involvement with the Lesbian Herstory Archives, and her eventual death. Through all of these moments and stories, Nestle is committed to representing the complexity and contradiction of a life. She foregrounds the fact that Hampton's life "does not fit our usual paradigm for doing lesbian history work. Her life does not seem to be organized around what we have come to see as the rites of gay passage, like coming out or going to the bars" (FU 41); as a result, Mabel's story exposes the classism and racism inherent in those formulaic ways of seeing. In relating this ill-fitting story, Nestle narrates a life that both attends to the life lived and to the inability of our methods to do that life justice.

By constructing a complex countermemory that can recognize contradictory and simultaneous exclusions, the historical exclusion of lesbians from the Civil Rights Movement and the similar exclusion of women of colour from lesbian and gay activism, Nestle provides a way of thinking about the role of lesbians in anti-racist activism as well as the role of lesbians of colour in the lesbian community, allowing for the possibility of a "Fragile Union" that can draw on both sameness and difference in order to productively intervene in the social structure of today.

Countermemory IV: Sex

Most of the pornographic narratives that Nestle writes deal explicitly with "outlaw" sex, that is, sex which by any heteronormative standards, and by many lesbian standards, would fall outside the confines of the acceptable or the desirable. From butch/femme sex, to S/M sex ("The Gift of Taking"), to group sex ("The Three"), to public sex ("The Uses of Strength") to adolescent sex ("Liberties Not Taken"), Nestle's narratives cross a series of boundaries, serving up a countermemory of sexual practices that produce the possibility of a range of sexual practices for the lesbian present and future. In making the sexual codes, practices and narratives of other moments in history available in the present day, Nestle provides us with, in Freeman's terms, "an ellipse" that connects the past to the present, and the allegorical tools to construct "an embodied temporal map" (734). In narrativising this variety of sexual practices from the past, Nestle makes available a series of codes and practices that can be integrated into the present and vividly demonstrates the "threat" that the past can represent in the present. Taking this metaphor of the ellipse a step further, I would like to suggest that the transmission of these countermemories of sex in fact constitute the transmission of a secret, and that Nestle's pornographic narratives constitute an *ars erotica* of both secrets learned and secrets bequeathed.

By far, the most honoured and chronicled form of lesbian sex in Nestle's work is butch/femme sex. In "Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s," Nestle gives us the political, historical, and sexual context to read her stories of butch/femme sex. She at once addresses the counternostalgia of lesbian-feminism, while at the same time creating a countermemory that attempts to narrativize how butch/femme worked, and what was at stake in its practice. Writing against lesbian-feminism's erasure of butch/femme practices, Nestle writes: "The butch-femme couple embarrassed other Lesbians (and still does) because they made Lesbians culturally visible" (RC 101). Nestle reminds us once again in this statement of the very publicness of lesbian sexuality, and of lesbian-feminism's discomfort with that publicness – its counternostalgic desire to leave the past behind, which I have already argued is in consort, intentionally or not, with privatization. Unwilling to accept the logic that butch/femme replicates heterosexual roles and power imbalances, Nestle turns to the reactions of heterosexuals themselves to disarm this particular mis-remembering. "My understanding of why we angered straight spectators so is not that they saw us modelling ourselves after them, but just the opposite: we were a symbol of women's erotic autonomy, a sexual accomplishment that did not include them" (RC 102). Again, the status of the public statement of sexuality is a key subtext to this observation, implicitly drawing a parallel between the straight world's desire to keep lesbians out of sight and out of mind, and lesbian-feminism's desire to do the same thing to large numbers of lesbians.

In contrast to this counternostalgia, Nestle gives us a roadmap for reading her stories of butch/femme sexuality:

> Butch/femme relationships, as I experienced them, were complex erotic statements, not phony heterosexual replicas. They were filled with a

> deeply Lesbian language of stance, dress, gesture, loving, courage, and autonomy. None of the butch women I was with, and this included a passing woman, ever presented themselves to me as men; they did announce themselves as tabooed women who were willing to identify their passion for other women by wearing clothes that symbolized the taking of responsibility. (RC 100)

This roadmap attempts to account for butch/femme's complexities, its practices, and its consequences. In Nestle's narrativising of butch/femme, the femme is characterized as a strong and desiring woman, offering her want and her need to a butch in a show of simultaneous strength and vulnerability. In exchange, the butch both respects and demands this offering, demonstrating her strength through satisfying the femme's need.

In "My Woman Poppa," for example, Nestle makes clear that there is no aping of heterosexuality when she describes "my woman poppa who does not want to be a man, but who travels in 'unwomanly' places and who does 'unwomanly' work" (FU 152), gendering her partner not as masculine but as butch, a butch "who knows how to take me in her arms and lie me down, how to spread my thighs and then my lips, who knows how to catch the wetness and use it, who knows how to enter me so waves of strength rock us both" (FU 151). Responding to the strength and knowledge of the butch, the femme offers up her own need, a need that explicitly recognizes the interdependence of both of their desires: "Oh, my darling, this play is real. I do long to suck you, to take your courage into my mouth, both cunt, your flesh, and cock, your dream, deep into my mouth, and I do" (FU 153). Likewise, in "The Gift of Taking," Nestle integrates the dynamics of butch/femme practices into an S/M fisting scene. "Here we will face each other, naked, yet dressed in ritual recognition. We will have the courage to bring to the surface the messages the body carries from older days" (RC 127). The sexual body carries messages from past to present, but also between public and private. "I know I will have marks to carry with me and I want them. I want to be reminded in the daily world of this breakthrough. The sweet soreness will burn through my heavy layers of work clothes and remind me of this need and this caring" (RC 129). A bodily secret in its own right, this corporeal memory is carried not in the "endlessly cited elsewhere of intimate life," but in the public, working, circulating body – and in the body of her writing. In narrativising these sexual practices, Nestle makes their codes and meanings available to her contemporary reader, offering up one central secret of her *ars erotica*: the dynamic interplay of needs and practices at work in butch/femme sexuality.

This transmission of the secrets of sexual pleasure is at work in all of Nestle's countermemories of sex, providing a varied alternative to the flattening of sexuality imposed by narratives of counternostalgia. Passed down to her from a different generation in "Liberties not Taken," Nestle then passes the secrets on herself to the women who follow her, both the women of the narratives and her readers. As such, her work embodies the complexity of Freeman's use of the term generations by demonstrating that history is not simply a matter of one generation succeeding another, but in fact, one generation (or many generations) generating and producing those that follow, making available the secrets of the past in order to build a present and a future.

Nestle begins her journey through generations as an adolescent in "Liberties Not Taken." In this story, Joan is a 13-year-old hired for the summer to work as a "mother's helper" to a woman named Jean. The summer is spent at Jean's family cottage, largely without the presence of her husband, Mac, who only spends time there on the weekends.[77] Over time, Joan learned of Jean's past, that "she was in the WAVES" and that "her favorite nights out were with her women buddies, spending long weekends in San Francisco bars" with her "special girlfriend" (RC 17). Joan recalls: "She told me these things as if I would understand them and I did" (RC 17). In this story, Joan is the student, Jean the teacher, passing along the secret knowledge of her lesbian past, her stories that carried "gifts of woman difference" (RC 20). Joan too is aware that she is being shown a secret and a gift. "My body was tuned for another sound. I knew she would come, and I wanted to show her I recognized my difference" (RC19). The key term in this statement is "recognized," connoting that Joan see this difference in herself because she also sees it in Jean. She has heard Jean's secrets, listened to her stories, and now has the beginnings of an understanding of herself that can carry her toward her future in the lesbian bars of the 50s.

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[77] Mac is, of course, a haunting presence in the narrative, exerting his masculine powers repeatedly through the narrative against both Joan and Jean. It is, however, the relationship between Joan and Jean that most interests me here.

Nestle's role turns from that of student to that of teacher in both "My Woman Poppa" and "The Three." In each of these stories, we see the figure of the confident older femme, imparting her wisdom to a younger butch and a younger femme respectively. Although the butch in "My Woman Poppa" is "wise in her woman loving ways," she is, nonetheless, "thirteen years younger than I" (FU 152) and involved with a woman who carries the secrets of butch/femme from an earlier era. Likewise in "The Three," the older femme "would watch over her young friend today, making sure that desire did not become loneliness" (RC 139). Along with her care for her young companion, the older femme also carries with her a knowledge of what the other woman wants and needs, a knowledge born of her years of experience. "She stared down at the beautiful face, knowing the young femme enjoyed the restraint and the knowledge that her passion was being fully observed. 'Yes,' she said to the straining woman, 'take it all'"(RC 141).

The transmission of the secret does not end with the characters in her stories, however. As cultural products, the secrets and lessons of Nestle's narrative also circulate among lesbian readers, making the codes and sexual practices of other times available to contemporary readers. I would argue that the resurgence of butch/femme in lesbian communities in the 1980s was significantly influenced by the work of Joan Nestle. The influence of Nestle's work on lesbians in the 1980s and 1990s can be clearly seen in "My

Fem Quest."[78] Nestle, arriving for a reading at the New York Lesbian and Gay Community Centre, approaches a woman working behind a table. Upon introducing herself, the woman replies, "'Oh, I know you, Joan...See,' she said, coming from behind the welcoming table and holding up her stockinged legs, 'I wore these in your honor'"(FU 127). Later in the same evening, a young woman approaches Nestle. "Bending down so she could whisper her words to me, she said, 'I had to come speak to you and thank you for what you have written about fems. You have given me the right to be myself.' ... I have emphasized youth in the retelling because two fem generations were represented that evening" (FU 127-8). While Nestle goes on to modestly dismiss her own role in the development of these fem selves, each of these events speaks to me of a kind of homage being paid across generations, a gift of thanks for both for the knowledge that Nestle's narratives share, and for the possibilities that they generate.

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[78] Interestingly, Nestle at some moment in the 1990s moves from using the spelling femme to using the spelling fem. She provides no reason for this shift.

Chapter 4

Fucking Excessive: Resistant Sexuality in Pat Califia

I think books carry subversive ideas in great sweeping currents around the world.

Pat Califia

The previous chapter explored the need to attend to the contradictions of history, and Joan Nestle's insistence that we not succumb to easy, totalizing narratives. Nestle's work instead authors a more complex and contradictory countermemory, one that is able to recognize the ways that the past infuses the present and the future. Pat Califia shares Nestle's concern for the cultural codes and practices of her community, but she articulates them in terms of her present tense moment. Califia's S/M porn works against the narrative of sexuality that we live with in everyday life, showing her readers how to practice dissident sexuality in their contemporary moment.

Although she is hardly the only lesbian S/M writer, I focus on Pat Califia because she is the most important and best known player and writer in the 1980s-1990s San Francisco leather scene. A founding member of Samois, a lesbian-feminist S/M organization, Califia is also a prolific writer. As a member of Samois she helped produce the anthology Coming to Power (1981) and the S/M education book What Color is Your Handkerchief? (1979). In addition, she edited The Lesbian S/M Safety Manual (1988), and she has written a sex advice column in *The Advocate* for some twenty years. Her first book, Sapphistry, was published in 1980 by Naiad Press and was the first explicit, unapologetic lesbian sex manual. An avowedly educational text, it included sections on several taboo practices like bondage and fisting, along with more conventional, or 'vanilla,' practices. Although I do not dwell on these pedagogical writings here, I might note in passing that Califia's work should be seen as a precursor to the educational initiatives of Susie Bright that I explored in Chapter 1.

In addition to being an S/M activist and educator, and more importantly for my purposes here, Califia is a committed pornographer. She has written short story collections (Macho Sluts, 1988, Melting Point, 1993, and No Mercy, 2000), a collection of essays (Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex, 1994, and contributions to The Second Coming: A Leatherdyke Reader, 1996), and a novel (Doc and Fluff, 1990), all of which explore – often in tantalizing detail – lesbian S/M scenes. Most recently, Califia's attention has turned to trans issues. The monograph Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism (1997) was followed by her announcement in the afterword to No Mercy that she has begun taking testosterone and is now transitioning to a life as a man. Although at the time of this writing Califia should more properly be referred to as Patrick, Califia does not disavow her past experience and identity as a lesbian. She is careful to note that this decision is one that is right for her now, and that she does not know what the future might bring. As such, she is not claiming an identity for herself retrospectively, rewriting the lesbian who was with the man who is. As she makes clear in the afterword to No Mercy, "lesbian culture has been my home for my entire adult life" (257). Consequently, I feel comfortable and confident in examining the works produced before this transitioning as the works of Pat, the crucial figure – archivist, activist, practitioner and chronicler – that she was to lesbian porn in the 1980s and 1990s.

What I want to do in this chapter is to look at Pat Califia's work in two distinct yet interrelated ways. Firstly, I want to analyse her portrayal of lesbian S/M as a sexual practice that exceeds and thereby challenges the disciplinary regimes of the capitalist state. Secondly, I want to propose that in producing and circulating these cultural productions, Califia makes available to a whole community of lesbians the possibility of both thinking and practising sex differently. As a result, she is able to help create a community that can stand against repressive state interests. Califia teaches us that sexual practices are political acts and that making those practices available to a wider range of people can be a force for resistance and change.[79]

Key to my analysis of S/M sexual practice as antagonistic to the goals of the capitalist state are the theories of George Bataille and Guy Hocquenghem. Bataille offers a framework and a language to explain the subversive potential of expenditure that cannot be harnessed to the capitalist goal of ascribing (and, therefore, circulating and profiting from) value. The bodily sensations of S/M, I argue, constitute just such an expenditure. I then turn to Guy Hocquenghem to propose that the specifically queer expenditure at work in lesbian S/M serves as a counterdiscourse to the normative and homogeneous demands of the state. In reading Califia's pornographic narratives, I argue that they defy the interests of the capitalist state in two key ways: firstly, they depict and encourage the kind of expenditure that Bataille elaborates; secondly, they constitute a de-privatized form of sexuality, one that Hocquenghem names "anal grouping," a sexuality that challenges and displaces the primacy of privatization, consumption and reproduction. In the end I argue that Califia provides us with a framework for practising sex as collective rather than individual, as productive rather than reproductive, and as public rather than private.

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[79] While an argument can certainly be made for the impact of these texts on those outside of the lesbian community, it is the impact on the lesbian community that interests me here.

1980s-1990s: Between Radical Feminism and Consumerist Queers

If my argument in this chapter is compelling, Califia's pornographic practices provide us with ways to work against the surprisingly analogous homogeneity of both our current moment of queer recuperation and her contemporary moment of Radical Feminism. As I will outline more fully in the Conclusion, the 1990s in many ways marks the end of the era of lesbian porn, its death knell sounded by stepped up privatization and an aggressive normalization of "homosexuality" in a highly regulated form. Queers are being increasingly incorporated by capitalism, militarism, and arguably fascism, and a pseudo-reproductive (and often literally reproductive) family. Now, The Advocate markets itself by boasting of the annual income of its readership; gays (at least the ones who don't tell) are free to become full-fledged members of the US military; and the fight for gay marriage and same-sex spousal benefits occupies the time and money of many middle-class activists. Unlike Guy Hocquenghem, who argues that there is a "repeatedly unsuccessful effort to draw homosexuality back into normality, an unsurmountable chasm which keeps opening up" (53), I would argue that increasing tolerance of "homosexuality" is successfully creating a new class of socially acceptable homosexuals who have been recuperated in the service of multinational capital, the cult of the individual, and the nuclear family. That Califia's S/M porn provides keys to giving queer sexuality a critical edge is one of the most important reasons for keeping her legacy alive.

Surprisingly, perhaps, the 1980s debates around lesbian S/M, while perhaps not fully recuperative, nonetheless participate in a similarly regressive impulse to normalize, categorize, and ultimately organize. Since I have discussed the "Sex Wars" in some detail in previous chapters, I will not belabour the argument here. However, as a way of anticipating Hocquenghem's productive approach to sexuality, I want to rephrase the conceptual ground of feminism's S/M debates as homogeneous in Bataille's sense of the term. Radical Feminism flattens out an entire set of practices, loosely grouped together as S/M, into a manageable category of "sexual oppression" or "misogynist sexuality" by means of referring to an under theorized conception of "the natural," thus simplifying

S/M practice rather than recognizing its complexities, disjunctions, or challenges. Pro-S/Mers, on the other hand, generally rely on liberal pluralism to defend their vision of progressive social change, a political ideology indebted to privatization, capitalism, and individualism. For example, Pat Califia, in her introduction to Macho Sluts, states: "It is the notion of consent which the rest of the world finds so abhorrent. It is the notion of sexual choice. It is the notion of having the right to set one's own limits" (25).[80] Underpinning Califia's argument is the assumption of individual free will and the right of individuals to determine their own desires and practices.[81] What makes each of these positions homogeneous is their respective impulses to *contain* S/M sex as either "just" oppression, or "just" a choice; however, it is in the ways that S/M exceeds each of these strategies of containment that it exerts its political force.

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[80] While there is no doubt that Califia employs the rhetoric of liberalism in her defence of S/M practices, she too recognizes the weaknesses of this approach. As she states in the "Afterglow" to Melting Point, "liberalism is not the same thing as revolution" (234).

[81] An excellent example of this can be found in the defence arguments in the Spanner case in Great Britain and its subsequent appeal to the European Court of Human Rights. The Spanner case involved a number of men who were charged with various counts of assault for participating in consensual S/M activities. The defence case rested almost entirely on the argument of mutual consent. However, one of the most significant aspects of the case was a ruling which stipulated that the bottoms involved in these activities not only could not consent to the activities, but could also be charged for aiding and abetting an assault on their own person. In appealing the case to the ECHR, the defendants in the case cited the "right to privacy" provisions of the European Charter.

How to Work Against Privatized "Homosexuality"

So how can we begin to examine lesbian S/M as a heterological and anoedipal practice? to determine whether or not it *can* (which is importantly different than *does*, because it often doesn't) constitute a revolutionary politics of sex? The key lies in following Deleuze and Guattari's, and Hocquenghem's call to unhinge desire from lack, and by extension from object choice, so that we are left with the "plugging in of organs...subject to no rule or law" (Hocquenghem 111). Once we understand how desire works in an S/M context, we can see how the practices themselves can constitute a "program," to cite Deleuze and Guattari, what Hocquenghem might call a scene of anal grouping. We can see how S/M not only reacts against the homogeneous interests of society, but can also act as a revolutionary sexual practice.

Georges Bataille identifies two basic forces at work in society: the homogeneous and the heterogenous. The homogeneous is characterized by the "commensurability of elements and the awareness of this commensurability: human relations are sustained by reduction to fixed rules based on the consciousness of the possible identity of delineable persons and situations" (137-8). In other words, the homogeneous relies on a set of common standards or fixed rules, and the deployment of those standards and rules in governing human relations. According to Bataille, social homogeneity "is linked to the bourgeois class by essential ties" (139) and thus serves its interests. Homogeneity is, however, "a precarious form" that must be protected by a "recourse to imperative elements that are capable of obliterating the various unruly forces or to bringing them under the control of order" (139). It is these unruly forces which Bataille terms the heterogenous. "The very term *heterogenous* indicates that it concerns elements that are impossible to assimilate" (140). The impossibility of assimilation means that the heterogeneous is always excessive, always that which falls outside the bounds of "commensurability." To further articulate the relationship between these two forces, I would argue that because the homogeneous operates in the service of the dominant interests of society, any attempt to control or circumscribe the heterogenous also serves the dominant interests of society.

Bataille's rubric of the homogeneous and heterogenous provides an excellent foundation for more fully understanding Guy Hocquenghem's critique of psychoanalysis, heavily influenced by Deleuze and Guattari, which in turn offers a way of understanding homosexual desire as a practice in opposition to the homogeneous, state- and capitalist serving, reproductive and ultimately Oedipalized desire. For Deleuze and Guattari, desire is not structured around the lack imposed by the Oedipus complex. On the contrary, they view desire as an active and productive force, rather than a reproductive one, that "respects the partiality of bodies (their polymorphous connective potential; their 'perversity'; their difference)" (Massumi 119). This expression of desire is, quite clearly, what Bataille would term heterogenous because it exceeds the fixed rules and standards that enchain desire to Oedipal sexuality. Once structured by Oedipus, however, desire becomes organized, controlled, and recuperated. Through Oedipus, psychoanalysis acts as an agent of the homogeneous, enforcing commensurability and by extension morality and heteronormativity. Jeffrey Weeks explains:

> The crucial point is that capitalism cannot live with the infinite variety of potential interconnections and relationships, and imposes constraints regulating which ones are to be allowed, i.e. essentially those relating to reproduction and the family. Psychoanalysis, by accepting the familial framework, is trapped *within* capitalist concepts of sexuality, concepts which distort the production of desire. Psychoanalytic theory, by concentrating on the Oedipal triangulation of parents and child, reflects the social, political and religious forms of domination in modern society. (31)

For Deleuze and Guattari on the other hand, desire circulates in the social, rather than the familial field, and is always in danger of being recuperated by capitalist impulses.[82]

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[82] While I recognize that this is the most cursory of overviews of Deleuze and Guattari, I offer it only in order to ground the theories of Guy Hocquenghem. It is the

It is this understanding of a dis-organized and fragmented desire, and capitalist society's need to constrain it, that grounds Hocquenghem's Homosexual Desire. Like Bataille and Deleuze and Guattari, Hocquenghem is concerned with the organizing and normalizing impulse of society and psychoanalysis. He implicitly draws on Bataille's conception of the heterogeneous and homogeneous and explicitly uses Deleuze and Guattari's re-formulation of desire to develop a specifically homosexual politics. Hocquenghem gives us a theoretical analysis of the conditions that produce and require homosexuality while the same time recognizing that there are aspects of homosexual desire that are unassimilable and offer a place from which to effect change. Hocquenghem gives us a specifically queer and political framework to a) recognize how the proliferation of discourses around sexuality further oppresses queers; b) analyse how psychoanalysis acts as a primary agent in this oppression, and consequently as a primary agent of the homogeneous; c) recognize how a critique of psychoanalytic theory, particularly a critique of the relationship of Oedipus and desire, not only allows us to see how the system of regulation is held in place, but also gives us a place from which we can attack those very systems of regulation; and d) recognize how it is precisely the flow of desire itself which is the greatest threat to the homogeneous. As Weeks notes in his

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specifically queer implications of this formulation, implications that Hocquenghem elaborates, that most interest me in this chapter.

preface to Homosexual Desire, "the work states the possibility of anti- capitalist and anti-oedipal struggles afforded by the gay movement" (24).

For Hocquenghem, "the emergence of unformulated desire is too destructive to be allowed to become more than a fleeting phenomenon which is immediately surrendered to recuperative interpretation" (94). In this sense, desire is a heterogenous threat which the homogeneous must constantly try to control or recuperate. The recuperative interpretation comes from psychoanalysis in the form of Oedipalization. As Hocquenghem notes, "In this respect, Freudianism has played a key role: it is both the discoverer of the mechanisms of desire and the organizer of their control" (73). Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, he further argues that:

> The abstract general force at work in economic or social life is no sooner discovered than it is privatised into new alienating relations. Having discovered that labour is the basis of value, bourgeois political economy enchains it as private ownership of the means of production; Freud discovers the libido to be the basis of affective life and immediately enchains it as the Oedipal privatization of the family. (73)

Given this understanding of desire's relationship to Oedipus, and as a result capitalism and other oppressive regimes, it follows that desires that do not conform to Oedipus are capable of standing against and opposing those oppressive regimes. To recognize and deploy these desires if a form of active resistance. Hocquenghem posits the desires of the anus, and the expression of those desires as "anal grouping," as just such an instance.

It is important to note here that Hocquenghem is using the anus in both a literal and metaphoric sense. Hocquenghem sees anal desire as the first to be privatized under Oedipus, where it is relegated to the status of "dirty little secret." The desires which emanate from it must be sublimated in order for appropriate Oedipalization to occur. As a result, the anus figures as both a literal body part and a symbol of all those desires which must be disciplined and regulated under the Oedipal regime. The oppositional potential of anal desire is most aptly expressed through anal grouping, which is to say the de-privatized and public expression of those desires. I would also add here, however, that these desires can also be read as *excessive*, to return to Bataille. That is, they produce a kind of libidinal surplus that cannot be harnessed into either profit, exchange, or reproduction.

To take this analysis still a step further, I would argue that lesbian pornography itself serves as just such an excess: it is capable of both producing and releasing unregulated desire. While heterosexual and gay male pornography have been usefully integrated by capitalism to harness their surplus value in the form of profit, lesbian pornography of the type that I am dealing with in this project has yet to be assimilated into the heteronormative, capitalist project.[83] Lesbian pornography of the 1980s and early

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[83] I stress the "as yet" part of this observation because, as I will argue in my

1990s, I suggest, produces and releases unregulated desire: desire for which there is no suitable object or container. And this is nowhere more true than in the case of lesbian S/M porn.

It precisely this excessiveness that has often eluded other analyses of lesbian S/M and lesbian S/M pornography. The few analyses to date err, to my mind, because they fail to see that lesbian S/M constitutes a threat by virtue of this very excessiveness. Instead, they attempt to come to an understanding of the material (primarily the work of Pat Califia) by interpreting it *within* the very frameworks that seek to contain it, namely feminism and psychoanalysis. Sara Dunn, for example, in "Voyage of the Valkyries," takes Califia to task for valuing and celebrating the very "outsiderness" of outlaw sex at the expense of feminist belonging. Dunn's argument implies that if only lesbian S/M fit more readily into feminist frameworks then feminists wouldn't be so bothered by it. The other two significant scholarly works done on lesbian S/M pornography, Julia Creet's "Daughters of the Movement: the Psychodynamics of Lesbian S/M Fantasy" (1991) and Lynda Hart's Between the Body and the Flesh: Performing Sadomasochism, both begin from the theoretical inside of psychoanalysis. Creet's article argues that lesbian S/M narratives can be read a rebellion against the "Symbolic Mother" of feminism. While Creet posits a Symbolic Mother as an alternative to Lacan's Symbolic Father, the rest of

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conclusion, the mid to late 1990s marked a moment where much of lesbian cultural production *was* in fact harnessed by the mainstream into profit-making commodities.

the argument falls nicely in line the familiar narratives of Lacanian psychoanalysis where all struggles for meaning find their nodal point in the Symbolic Father. Hart's book is similarly implicated in the discourses of psychoanalysis, asking what it might mean to perform some of these practices, focussing on the psychoanalytically defined terms of fantasy and the "real." In attempting to both explain and read lesbian S/M from within these contexts, their authors are largely unable to account for the ways in which lesbian S/M exceeds those very categories of intelligibility.

In one of the few scholarly works on S/M that I have found intellectually enabling, Patrick Hopkins starts his analysis with the practices themselves, and then moves outward in order to light upon theoretical frameworks that can help to explain and understand it. He hints at the different form of desire at work in S/M thus:

> Sexual desires do not always, perhaps not even predominantly, take as their objects isolated acts or even isolated bodies.... An entire context can be the "object" of desire. Not just an act, not just a body, not just a physiological reaction, but rather the entirety of bodies and circumstances and interpretation is desired. One can lust after a scene. (125)

Here, Hopkins points us toward a method of reading S/M that recognizes that "the scene" both facilitates and releases anoedipal desire.

Macho Sluts and Melting Points

Pat Califia's Macho Sluts is arguably the emblematic text of 1980s lesbian S/M pornography. It stands as a watershed in lesbian porn publishing, predating such other collections as Leatherwomen and the Best Lesbian Erotica series, opening up an entire field of possibility for writers and readers alike. In Macho Sluts, Califia demonstrates how desire flows among both contexts and specificities. As an anthology of short stories, it resists readings which would see it as a whole entity and serves, rather, as a collection of moments and scenes, bodies and body parts.[84] In fact, Califia even cautions her readers about stories that they might avoid altogether. Porn is like that; it is a genre that allows us to skip to the parts that we like – the parts that make us hot. The variety of scenes presented, from incest stories to gang bangs to sex with gay men, is bound to provide most people with at least something that will leave them cold, something that they will skip. But likewise, Califia's collection provides enough variety (even "A Dash of Vanilla") to linger, acting for some as a "recruitment poster, as flashy and fast and seductively intimidating as I could make it" (Macho Sluts 10) and for others as a theoretical problem. The small amount of critical work done on Califia to date, for example, focusses almost exclusively on the stories "The Hustler" and "The Surprise

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[84] It is interesting to note that all of Califia's books, like Joan Nestle's, with the exception of her deliberately educational Sapphistry and The Lesbian S/M Safety Manual, and her first book of fiction, Doc and Fluff, are collections.

Party."[85] I don't find it surprising that these are the stories which have lingered for me either. But what is it about these stories that makes them linger in both a political/theoretical and erotic way (though I am loathe to separate the two)?

The answer lies precisely in the way that each of these stories both invokes and exceeds the structures of understanding that readers are likely to bring to them, namely feminism and lesbian identity politics, respectively. "The Hustler" is the story of an S/M dyke trapped in a feminist dystopia and "The Surprise Party" depicts a scene where a lesbian is topped by three gay men. While each story is careful to remind us of the interpretive frameworks that we may bring to them, they nonetheless proceed to disorganize both the bodies and desires that flow through the narrative as well as the reader's own frames of reference.

"The Hustler" suggests the political necessity and efficacy of S/M practices under a repressive ideological regime. The story is set at some point in the future, after the war with patriarchy has ended and a new feminist bureaucracy has taken over. Noh Mann, our self-named narrator, discovers quickly that feminist regulation and patriarchal regulation amount to just about the same thing. She is still just a pervert, only now she has been charged with pornographic sexual activity, an ordinance "which covers prostitution and misogyny, and assorted other counter-revolutionary acts" (MS 183). She lives her life almost entirely outside of the new feminist system, turning tricks and selling drugs to make money and refusing to have her desires recuperated by the (new) status quo. This refusal comes explicitly from her understanding of her desire as excessive, something that stands against the narrowing impulses of the system to which she is subject. For example, in the opening scene of the story, she is at a job interview set up by her social worker. If she doesn't get this job, she will be put on welfare and retrained, which is exactly what she wants. In order to deal with this situation, to steel herself up to resist the system yet again, she must draw strength from her previous sexual life. She chooses to do this by remembering the disconnected and fragmented sensations of an S/M scene.

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[85] Creet and Dunn, for example, both choose these stories for their analyses.

> Reconstruct, I order myself. You hang from your wrists, the tips of your toes scrabble for tenuous contact with the ground, cold air hits your bare skin as your shirt is ripped open. You hear the swish of the whip and scream before you feel the pain. The fear makes you scream, but the pain leaves you numb. It doesn't stop, it doesn't alter its character, you have no choice but to learn how to accept it and take it and ride it out. ... To be human is to be a prisoner of your own suffering flesh, but your physical senses allow you to catch a glimpse of some other possibility, something free and mysterious. (MS 180-1)

This "other possibility," something that Noh Mann can only remember affectively, is the disorganized and excessive pleasure of bottoming, the threatening and unrecuperable expression of desire that the dominant interpretive regime of feminism is incapable of comprehending and determined to control and eliminate.

This memory allows Noh to recall her anger, sending her on a journey in her own mind that recalls all of the injustices of this so-called system of equality. She feels "cold and deadly and righteous" (MS 185). She begins to lash out at the social worker, taunting her with a cross she wears around her neck (Christianity is a remnant of the patriarchy, they say), describing in concrete detail just what she had been doing when she was charged with "pornographic sexual activity."

> 'Don't you want to know what I told her? After she got down on her knees in the alley and started licking my belt buckle? Huh?' I get my hand near my crotch and make a suggestive masturbatory motion. Her eyes rivet themselves to my hand. She rearranges her big fanny nervously on the chair. 'I called her queer,' I chant 'a cunt-sucking little lezzie, a dyke, a boot-licking slut.' (MS 185)

This outburst is enough to make the interviewer stamp her application rejected. By conjuring the memory of her previous S/M life, our protagonist is able to access the anger that she needs to resist interpellation by the new feminist bureaucracy. The story unmasks the homogeneity of a particular feminist politics and shows our protagonist invoking the heterogeneity of S/M in order to actively resist it.

"The Surprise Party" is similarly concerned with a protagonist who resists regulation through desire, only this time the regulation is as much internal as external, both for the protagonist and for the text. The protagonist must negotiate between herself as a lesbian, subject to both her own internal and society's external definitions of what that means, and the scene in which she has sex with three gay men. The text itself faces this same negotiation, recognizing itself as a lesbian text, while at the same time keenly aware of the interpretation that the reader, particularly the lesbian reader, will bring to it. The text succeeds in exposing these interpretations as limiting and regulating by placing the protagonist's desire outside of oedipalizing object-choice and into a different context – dominance and submission. The protagonist recontextualizes her activities with these men by pointing out that "this act of penetration was firmly situated within a context of dominance and submission, the core of her eroticism" (MS 233). Here we see a different context for desire: our protagonist does not suddenly become bisexual or heterosexual because of her desire since her desire is not for the men themselves as objects but rather an act, penetration, within a context, dominance and submission. To reinvoke Hopkins, she "lust[s] after a scene."

As the protagonist experiences this scene her desires become increasingly fragmented and suspended. She becomes a series of body parts, as do the men involved, and her experience of pleasure cannot be recuperated into any totalizing framework.

> She admitted it, barely coherent, driven out of her mind by the tongues lapping all over her body and the fingers inside that spread lubrication up and down, again and again, from her clit to her asshole, but kept her empty, driving her to produce more and more fluid. She could feel the shape of her own internal sex-parts, knew how deep her vagina went and the angle it took, by the way it ached to be pushed open and stroked. (MS 230)

This excessive pleasure cannot even be harnessed for the purpose of orgasm. "It all feels so good I don't want to come. I'm just afraid it will stop," (MS 233) she says, and again later,

> And the bastard had one hand around her waist, fiddling with her clit! Damn him! It was distracting. She wanted to be able to concentrate on the penetration. She wanted to feel her ass milking him, delighting him until he came. The possibility of coming herself was annoying. (MS 240)

It is in the moments before her final orgasm[86] when she finally gives up any pretense of interpretation and gives herself over to pure sensation.

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[86] Or at least her final *narrated* orgasm. The text continues beyond this point to provide a single paragraph summary of further acts that begins "there was more after that, but she had trouble remembering it later" (MS 240).

> Under severe and continuous pain, the soul reaches a certain kind of clarity. Confusion and hope cannot be tolerated. Anything that deflects energy away from withstanding the pain becomes useless, impossible to hang onto. Such ballast is jettisoned automatically. Pride... is the first thing to be thrown overboard. (MS 237)

And what is pride if not "common standard," an identifiable and applicable interpretive framework that is able to limit and control both emotion and sensation? [87] This moment marks the narrative approximation of unregulated and unrecuperable desire

So, how does this anoedipal and excessive desire work to effect change not only in the participants themselves, but also in a social context? In Homosexual Desire, Hocquenghem provides one model, one form of experiment: anal grouping.

> The desires directed toward the anus, which are closely connected with homosexual desire, constitute what we shall call a "group" mode of relations as opposed to the usual "social" mode.... Homosexual desire is a group desire; it groups the anus by restoring its functions as a desiring

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[87] It is ironic, however, that just as the protagonist comes closest to pure excess, the narrative voice changes sharply to a far more detached and didactic voice. It is not the protagonist herself who succumbs to interpretation, but Califia herself. I'll return to this observation later in the chapter when I discuss the disjunction between the actual sexual practices Califia narrates, and the narration itself.

> bond, and by collectively re-investing it against a society which has reduced it to the status of shameful little secret. (110-11)

While Hocquenghem puts forward the sublimated desires of the anus as an alternative to the phallic sexuality that psychoanalysis valorizes, it is useful to note once again that he is using the anus in both a literal and metaphorical sense. As such, lesbian desire falls within this metaphorical definition. Just as psychoanalysis places the phallic stage after the anal and oral stages, female desire not directed toward the phallus is likewise a regressive and ultimately anoedipal desire. As Diana Fuss argues: "In the history of psychoanalysis, female homosexuality is theorized almost exclusively in terms of the pre: the preoedipal, the presymbolic, the prelaw, the premature, even the presexual" (Identification Papers 58). But, as Hocquenghem reminds us, "to fail one's sublimation is in fact merely to conceive of social relations in a different way" (111), and what we conceive of is a place where "the group can then take its pleasure in an immediate relation where the sacrosanct differences between public and private, between individual and social, will be out of place" (111).

This displacement of the sacrosanct distinction between the public and the private takes two distinct forms in Califia's narratives: it is embodied in both the narrative framing of the texts and in the sex that is actually portrayed. As I have noted in my introduction, Teralee Bensinger argues that the lesbian community itself acts as the setting of desire in lesbian pornography. It functions as a *mise en scène* of lesbian sexuality.

producing and circulating desires that are generated (and often enacted) publicly rather than privately. "Big Girls," a short story from Califia's Melting Point, is an excellent example of how the community itself must set the scene for lesbian sexuality.[88] The story begins with an elaborate description of Jax, a lesbian bar, detailing its urban geography, its internal geography, its clientele, its social order. It is in a fairly rundown part of town; its clientele is mostly working-class, either Butch/Femme or S/M dykes; many of the women are prostitutes, or as Califia calls them "the glue," the only women who dare to cross the line between the white clientele and the black clientele at will. At the top of the erotic hierarchy are the bartenders, the women who will only sleep with newcomers after a regular has "checked them out." There are a number of simultaneous scenes going on in the bar, from femme tops working over softball players, to prostitutes picking up pool sharks. All of these things combine to create a specifically lesbian erotic space and it is only once this setting has been established that we can progress to the hard-core scene between Kay and Reid. As Califia notes herself in the "Afterglow" to the second edition, "that part of the story stayed in me [the description of the neighbourhood around Jax and the description of the bar itself] because it is one of the more important themes in my work.... Community requires territory" (MP 226).

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[88] "Big Girls" is certainly not the only one of Califia's stories to employ this narrative strategy. I use it here as emblematic of a number of stories, including "Jesse" and "The Calyx of Isis" from Macho Sluts.

The communal setting not only works on the characters in the stories, but also on the readers of the story. This sort of description creates a position for the reader as a participant voyeur rather than a simple spectator. The reader is actually a member of the very community that the story represents. The reader can enter the text at the level of community, recognizing Jax as a kind of "everybar" and knowing her position within the space. Like our protagonists, Kay and Reid, she too has her desires aroused by the scene around her.

While the lesbian community per se may be emblematic of this communal setting of desire, it also extends to a series of other sexualized public places: fetish bars, men's leather bars, and peep shows. This extension makes explicit what references to the lesbian community leave implicit, namely that sex carried out in a communal setting is public. Califia's stories push us to recognize that it is in this very publicness that lesbian sex stands against the status quo, and that publicness cannot be easily circumscribed within the relative safety of the lesbian community. For example, in "What Girls Are Made Of," Califia not only troubles the distinction between the private and the public, she troubles the distinction between the lesbian public sphere and the broader sexual public sphere. The story centres on Bo, a dyke getting ready for a date who goes into a straight sex shop to browse for an accessory for the evening. Her curiosity lures her into the booths in the rear of the shop where she witnesses her first peep show. The show consists of three women having S/M sex with one another, a scene that Bo is ambivalent about, but which gets her hot in spite of herself. She dismisses the women as "a bunch of mercenary straight bitches" who "don't know anything about making love to a woman" (MP 184). Here, Bo articulates a common misconception of many lesbians: that lesbian public sex is only enacted in lesbian public space. When the sex workers drag her back to their dressing room and make her their boy toy for the evening, coming back between shows to tag-team top her, Bo must abandon this distinction.

It is not just at the level of setting where the publicness of sex is enacted in Califia, but also at the level of the sexual acts themselves. "Calyx of Isis," another of the stories in Macho Sluts, offers a perfect example of a particularly lesbian "grouping" – a story where the distinctions between the public and the private, between the individual and the social are suspended. The story revolves around an extended scene where Roxanne, a bottom, is topped by eight different women over a period of several hours. While the scene is specifically set up by Roxanne's lover, Alex, to test Roxanne's devotion to her (a test which she ultimately passes), there is a series of long and detailed moments where the story forgets the primacy of this individual/private relationship and instead offers a glimpse of a lesbian "grouping." As a group scene, the boundary between public and private is repeatedly breached. The event is largely private; it is by invitation only, and is contained within a dungeon space to the point where security guards have been posted at the doors to keep away the "disco-bunnies [who] would pass out en masse" (MS 105). And yet, it is also a public event, where the women are as often voyeurs as participants and where Roxanne is transformed from private to public property. "'Let these bitches wear themselves out on me if it will entertain you. But I belong to you, Daddy,'" Roxanne suggests, only to be corrected: "'Well, for now you belong to them'" (MS 122). The threat of this transformation is twofold: first, it marks the possibility, even the desirability, of relinquishing private ownership; second, it posits the option of public or communal ownership.

The dynamics of the group likewise display a confusion between the individual and the social. Before Roxanne has even arrives at the dungeon, the tops go through a sort of bonding ritual.

> She [Michael] gathered Tyre under her arm, and Tyre embraces EZ, who pulled Kay close. Kay and Anne-Marie held hands, Anne-Marie put her arm around Chris, and Chris stood hip-to-hip with Joyous Day, who put her arm around Alex's waist. They edged in until they got as close as possible. Someone started to hum. The hum got louder. It was like standing inside a beehive.... Tyre and Joyous Day moved Alex into the center of the circle, and they all pressed up against her, lifted her, put her down. And the circle gradually separated, fell apart. (MS 111)

It is only after the group has been constituted *as a group* that Roxanne arrives and the scene(s) begins.

As the story progresses, the top women are more and more frequently referred to as "the pack," indicating both their own group desire and Roxanne's inability and/or lack of desire to individuate them. "And, in fact, they did just that – hand after hand plunging as deep as it could go turning slowly into her, then being withdrawn to give its neighbor a turn. She was being laid open to the pack, made equally the vessel of each of its members" (MS 121). Roxanne herself often finds the identity of the various women sliding as they transform more and more clearly into a group. For example, in the fisting scene with EZ and Kay, Roxanne is initially capable of differentiating the two women. Each speaks to her, yells at her, and coaxes her and she responds to them both. However, as the scene progresses, their identities become confused: "'Go ahead,' Kay said. Her voice jolted Roxanne. She had somehow forgotten that it was Kay who was working in and out of her ass. EZ's face had been with her so constantly that she had somehow come to believe that it was EZ fucking her" (MS 134). But these individual slippages multiply and reform until it is the pack itself and no individual member fucking Roxanne.

> Roxanne realized, however, that as each member of the pack worked her over, the pack itself – as an entity – became a more powerful force in her imagination. The women seemed to loom nearer and taller, their voices more forceful and resonant. She knelt, small and helpless, in an amphitheatre of cruel feminine presences... But she was also a current of energy that held the pack together – the point at which they crossed and

> focussed. She was the medium through which they communicated with one another. Her body was a palpable message, a bond, a live wire strung between eight strong women. (MS 141)

This scene exemplifies the potential of the lesbian sadomasochist body as a revolutionary body. Through S/M the women experience and demonstrate the potential for excessive, or heterogeneous, desire and pleasure. They violate the edict of Oedipus to privatize and thus to harness surplus value, and instead enact a "group" desire, a public and collective scene where the desires and pleasures exceed and oppose organization, regulation, and recuperation.

This analysis of "Calyx of Isis" stands in stark contrast to Lynda Hart's reading of the story, her only detailed reading of Califia's work. While Hart does contend that the story "blurs the lines between the individual and the community" (156) and while she recognizes the dynamic of the pack itself (157), there is a significant trace of Oedipal interpretation here. For example, when one particular scene becomes too much for Roxanne and she "suddenly wanted to quit"(MS 136), Hart represents the boundary that has been crossed as a violation "of Roxanne's privacy"(154), arguing that the "loss of inhibition [required by this particular act]...is tantamount to relinquishing one's hold on the coherent 'self' that marks the transition from infancy to adulthood" (154). Instead of reading the ways that the story undercuts and dispenses with both the concept of privacy and the individual, she instead sees the text as only operating at the limit of those categories. This stems from the fact that she firmly grounds her analysis in the primacy of the lovers' relationship, Alex and Roxanne. She argues that "although there are multiple references to the failure, even the undesirability, of fidelity, it is at the same time the goal toward which the narrative obsessively aims" (153). While Alex's desire to "test" Roxanne is the hook of the narrative (she asks: "can you give it away? And if you loan it out, can you get it back?" (MS 97)), in fact, through the majority of the story, Alex is almost completely absent. Nothing in the narrative grounds or reinforces Roxanne's professions of dedication to Alex, but we repeatedly see her interacting intensely with the other tops in the scene. Alex's narrative function is almost exclusively that of voyeur.

Teaching Us a Lesson

It is in this voyeuristic role that I think there is another important argument to be made about the story. If the "testing" of Roxanne is the ostensible driving force behind the action in the story, I would argue that it serves not a *sexual* purpose but rather a *narrative* one. Mary T. Conway, in "Spectatorship in Lesbian Porn: The Woman's Woman's Film," argues that Clips and The Safe Sex Sluts, the two first video offerings from the lesbian production company Blush/Fatale, structure themselves to teach their viewers how to watch porn. The first film, Clips, does this by including a discussion after the sex scenes themselves with the actresses. Detached from the porn itself, however, Conway contends that this particular strategy fails. In The Safe Sex Sluts, however, the education is effective because instead of removing the educational component from the "action," the "lesson" is integrated into the sex scenes themselves. The main characters in the film act as voyeurs, visiting a sex club and watching a host of different sexual encounters. Conway is persuasive in her conclusion that in suturing the viewer to the voyeur, the viewer learns the art of voyeurism, learns to be turned-on by looking. Alex's voyeurism in "Calyx of Isis" serves the same narrative purpose. Readers can feel both inside and outside of the scene at the same time, observing the action in the same way that Alex does. It is no coincidence that Hart sees the moments where Alex enters the scenes as disruptions. However, far from being moments where the privatized and individualized "drive" of the story is reinscribed, they are, in fact, moments where voyeurism itself is reinscribed.[89]

Certainly a series of familiar narratives frames is at work in the stories in Macho Sluts. Roxanne does, after all, "earn" her rings in a pervert's version of "happily ever after." In "The Surprise Party" it is the reader who is surprised to discover at the end of the scene that the cops who ostensibly kidnapped and gang-raped our protagonist were, in fact, friends throwing her a scene as a birthday gift, strangely mimicking the all too familiar safety net that "it was all just a dream." In "Jesse," the main characters wake up the morning following their scene and discuss what comes next over coffee and the newspaper.

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[89] It is useful here to note that "Calyx of Isis" is 97 pages long, and that the main action of the story, the scenes at the Calyx, occupies 68 pages. Given this fact, I don't find it surprising that the narrative feels the need to re-place the reader vis-a-vis the action.

> 'I know I don't want a twenty-four-hour-a-day S/M relationship,' I said quietly. 'I'm not a social masochist. I enjoy taking care of Number One like any reasonably sane adult woman.'
>
> She grinned with relief. 'Hey, that's not what I want either. I can't top somebody full-time. To borrow a famous quote, kicking ass is hard work.' (MS 61)

This conversation serves to reassure readers of the everyday existence of the characters. While each of these instances could be read as a moment where Califia backs off from the radical possibilities that her sex scenes produce and instead retreats into convention, I would argue, rather, that they serve a pedagogical function: in training her readers to read lesbian porn, Califia provides them with some sort of purchase through these recognizable narrative conventions. They serve as the supports from which she can string an approximation of the state of suspension and disintegration that S/M sex produces. It seems ridiculous to suggest that Califia eases her readers along when the sex that she portrays is so uncompromising, and yet, at the level of narrative convention, this is precisely what she does.

While Califia's work teaches lessons both at the level of sexual practice and at the level of narrative pleasure, it is also important to recall that her work serves as a publicly circulating testimony to the possibility of thinking and acting differently. I have made the argument in Chapter 1 via On Our Backs and Bad Attitude that cultural productions play a major role in the constitution of a community. Through both her fiction and her non-fiction, Califia establishes the possibility of a sex radicalism that stands in opposition to the privatizing and normalizing goals of a capitalist and heteronormative regime; she makes it possible for an entire community to think sex as a public, communal and productive practice.

Califia's pornographic practice puts forward a revolutionary sexual politics in several ways. Firstly, it demonstrates a form of sexual practice that undercuts and stands in opposition to the heteronormative and therefore capitalist regime of sexuality. Secondly, it enacts a group desire, de-privatizing sex and making a more public and communal form of sexuality available to its readers. Thirdly, it actively teaches its readers how to read and extract pleasure from porn. And lastly, it serves as a public and cultural statement, circulating in the world, potentially changing both the practices and the minds of its readers. In this sense, it too constitutes an *ars erotica*, a passing on of the secret to a whole new community of perverts.

Conclusion

‘Revolution,’ once the totemic catchphrase of the counterculture, has become the totemic catchphrase of boomer-as-capitalist.

Thomas Frank, “Why Johnny Can’t Dissent” (38)

When I began this project, I had only an intuitive idea that something in the world of lesbian sex-and-porn wasn’t quite the same anymore. What I’ve come to realize over the course of this writing is that while this project began as a contemporary one, it is now an historical one; the moment that is both the subject and object of this study has passed, or has at least been immeasurably altered. Pat Califia has become Patrick; Kiss & Tell have turned to trauma as the subject of much of their art; On Our Backs has been bought out by *Girlfriends*; and, tragically, Joan Nestle is battling cancer. Such is the unpredictability of both history and intellectual life. But history and intellectual life also demand new questions and new attempts to answer them, and so here, in this conclusion, I face the unasked question of this project: why does it end?

I have argued throughout this dissertation that lesbian sexual practices and lesbian pornographic productions stand in opposition to and in excess of discourses that would recuperate lesbianism into the fields of feminism, heteronormativity and capitalism. I have laid out the ways that these productions produce a community that has the capacity to think sex differently, and to act on that knowledge. I have argued that the transmission of this knowledge has challenged the interpretive framework of feminism, our understanding of and relationship to history, and the disciplining discourses of sexuality, primarily heteronormativity and capitalism. In my analysis of On Our Backs and Bad Attitude, I argued for the important role that cultural production and circulation have in building a lesbian community, and how the substance of that production can actively change the ideas and practices of its audience. At its most basic level, the message of that chapter is that sexually explicit cultural production is a vital component and producer of the lesbian community. In my analysis of Kiss & Tell I argued that pornographic productions are capable of engaging with the repressive regimes of both Radical Feminism and legal regulation. The lesson in that chapter is that sexually explicit representations can be a pivotal way of resisting each of these regimes' interpellative impulses. In my analysis of Joan Nestle I argued that creating sexual countermemories, memories that insist on the contradictions and uneasiness of history, is an important political act. The message of that chapter is that to remember is to make important knowledge available to the present and future of political struggles. And finally, in my analysis of Pat Califia, I argued that lesbian sadomasochism enacts a type of sexuality that exceeds heteronormative and capitalist structures of sexuality. The lesson here is that lesbian sex and lesbian pornographic productions can constitute both a radical and a revolutionary sexual politics.

There is no doubt that these pornographic interventions have immeasurably altered the field of feminism as we know it. Radical Feminist politics have seen its influence and currency within both feminist and lesbian circles diminish, while its influence on legislation and litigation has increased. Lesbian history is no longer a narrow field dedicated to the recuperation of famous and emblematic lesbians in history, but rather is far more actively engaged in recovering the everyday lives and experiences of lesbians in the past. And the lesbian community itself is filled with a greater variety of sexual ideas and practices than has often been the case. Within these discursive fields, it is undeniable that lesbian pornographic production, and the debates about sexuality that it both produced and was produced by, has changed what it is possible to think and how it is possible to act. Unfortunately, in the mainstream fields of heteronormativity and capitalism they have not had the same impact. Capitalism's creativity and resiliency have managed to succeed where Radical Feminism failed; capitalism has recoded the sign "lesbian" and made dissent in its previous forms nearly obsolete.

The Thomas Frank epigraph that opens this chapter succinctly sums up the way that commodification has colonized the very idea of rebellion, dissent, or opposition in the service of offering more and more varied pleasures to consumers. This is, as almost every theorist of late capitalism will attest, one of the great tricks of late capitalism. It requires its participants to serve as consumers, indulging in profit-making pleasures that mask their attendant production of surplus capital. And this is nowhere more true than in the realm of the sexual. As Linda Singer observes:

> sexuality emerges in the capitalist discipline as both that which is to be disciplined, and that which remains as excess or resistance to discipline and therefore must also be pacified, accommodated, indulged. It is also, consequently, that which must also be socially managed and coordinated to maximize its social utility, i.e., its profitability. (35)

For Singer, maximizing the profitability of sexuality takes two general forms, the reproduction of workers and consumers, and the reproduction of wants. Singer goes on to argue that this second form of profitability requires "a form of control by incitement, not by the repression but by the perpetual promise of pleasure" (36). This perpetual promise of pleasure leads to satisfaction through consumption – governance by the commodity.

The lesbian cultural productions that I have examined in this project had not, at the time of their publication/exhibition and circulation, been recuperated into the logic of the commodity. As I argue in Chapter 4, their surpluses and excesses, far from harnessing pleasure in the service of capital accumulation, in fact stand in opposition to it. They feed and form a community that exists largely under the radar of capitalism.[90] Lesbian bars continually struggle to stay afloat; lesbian publications are always perilously close to closing up shop; lesbian businesses are more often a labour of love than a "sound investment"; and each of these cultural sites is disproportionately dependent on volunteer labour to remain alive. This stands in stark contrast to the gay male community where bars, businesses and publications have been far more commercially successful. While gay male culture of the 1980s and early 1990s "successfully" commodified itself, lesbian culture did not.

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[90] I do not mean to imply here that lesbian businesses set out to lose money or to survive on a shoe string. I'm sure that the majority would have welcomed the accumulation of some "surplus value" but the fact is that most did not.

But the consequences of not fully participating in the capitalist project played themselves out in the mid 1990s with the rise of "Lesbian Chic." At this historical moment, lesbianism and lesbians begin to be successfully commodified and packaged, interpellated into the political economy of capitalist, and by extension heteronormative, sexuality. What is interesting about this phenomenon is that this commodification happens largely at the hands of the mainstream media, and not at the hands of the lesbian cultural producers themselves. Where gay-male periodicals like *The Advocate* became increasingly sleek and stylized, targeting the hard-bodied middle-class male consumer,[91] lesbian magazines simply can't exert the same market pull. Magazines like *Girlfriends* attempt to frame themselves as a kind of *Advocate* for women, but they never succeed in becoming the full scale commodity that gay male magazines do. That task is left to magazines like *Vanity Fair* and *New York Magazine*.

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[91] Of course, the commodification of gay-male culture by the mainstream is by now well established. I draw attention to this distinction, however, because I think that there is an important difference in the structural power relations at work when a sub-culture manages to serve its own economic interests first. Gay men remain a desirable "target market" for capitalist exploitation, while the lesbian community remains a

It is important to note that this commodification takes place in the service of mainstream capitalist expansion in the first instance, not in the service of lesbian cultural expansion. "Lesbian Chic" is not a cultural phenomenon that targets the lesbian "market" and seeks to exploit it; rather, it capitalizes on the outsider status of lesbians in order to bring that "chic" to the marketplace as a whole.[92] As a result, it toys with a fine line, wanting to exploit as fully as possible the outsider status, while not wanting to alienate potential consumers. The result is a glut of lesbian images that are scrubbed down and made as mainstream as possible. It begins with the white, middle-class, tax-paying lesbians on ABC's 20/20 and in *Newsweek*'s cover story on lesbians,[93] proceeds to the massive distribution of k.d. lang and Cindy Crawford's by now infamous Vanity Fair

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marketing tool to be deployed in the mainstream.

[92] For a fine overview of the ways that consumer culture capitalizes on and disarms "the outsider" see Thomas Frank and Matt Weiland Eds. Commodify Your Dissent.

[93] I am using the term "white" here loosely: though carefully multicultural, the couple on the cover of *Newsweek* nonetheless represented the kind of aggressively suburban, middle-class normality conventionally coded "white."

cover,[94] and reaches its apex in the reproductive lesbian units of Melissa Etheridge and Julie Cypher, and Sharon Stone and Ellen Degeneres' characters in If These Walls Could Talk 2. Under Lesbian Chic, lesbians become at once commodities and consumers, packaged as an erotic other for the heterosexual mainstream.

Importantly, however, lesbians are also being packaged by that same mainstream for our own consumption. While this may not be the primary work being done by Lesbian Chic, the images and politics that it produces and espouses are circulated on a mass scale, one far broader than the lesbian pornographic productions that I have been examining in this project could ever imagine or strive for. For perhaps the first time since the lesbian pulp novels of the 1950s, lesbians can now purchase their representational pleasure not from other lesbians but from the mainstream, complete with all the compromises that make them marketable. As a result, the newly packaged pleasures that are purchased are those that coincide nicely with the capitalist and heteronormative project. We can buy lesbianism on the cover of magazines produced by massive media conglomerates; we can watch ourselves represented on television and in film by other subsidiaries of those same conglomerates; those of us who can afford it can even access the technologies to make our sexuality literally reproductive. These new model lesbians available for our consumption are not perverts, sex radicals, gender benders, or even wimmin-identified-wimmin; on the contrary, they are savvy, corporate, white, upwardly mobile and feminine. In one media

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[94] This is as "edgy" as Lesbian Chic gets.

frenzy, assimilation has become the dominant politics of huge segments of the lesbian community.

So how does participation in this new commodity market undermine, or at least neutralize, the oppositional politics of lesbian pornographic production? The answer lies in the fact that lesbian pornographic productions "fail" to become commodities, at a moment where North American culture at large is turning lesbians themselves into exactly that. As a result, lesbian pornographic productions seem more and more in the late 1990s to represent not interesting and contradictory forms of cultural critique and community building, but rather poor imitations of their more affluent gay and straight bedfellows. They begin to lose their allure and cultural influence when they are put in direct competition with the bright and shiny packages which can't help but seem so much "better" in a world which idolizes exactly those qualities.

But I would caution my readers to remember the work that has been done to build a community that has consistently challenged the necessity of conformity, not for the sake of the challenge itself, but because it is unwilling to abandon those parts that do not conform so easily. I would like to recall the warnings of Christopher Castiglia and Elizabeth Freeman, that the "new" is not always the progressive, and that an invitation to inhabit the inside rather than the outside leaves those same distinctions in place. We must also recall Cindy Patton's injunction that for queer to become a "sinkhole in the circulation of capital" ("To Die For" 346) is in fact no progress at all. And we must remember, in the words of Pat Califia, that "liberalism is not the same thing as revolution" (MP 234). If we forget these lessons we engage in our own counternostalgia and we risk losing the knowledge that lesbian culture holds. I truly hope that Guy Hocquenghem is right, and that although homosexual desire is always being recuperated into the realm of the "normal," an "insurmountable chasm" between assimilation and opposition will keep opening up (53).

So, in the end, I find myself rather strangely offering up this analysis as a history. And I hope that, in my own way, I've learned some of Joan Nestle's lessons, and that this history can in some way haunt this present, and arouse some possibilities for our community's future.

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